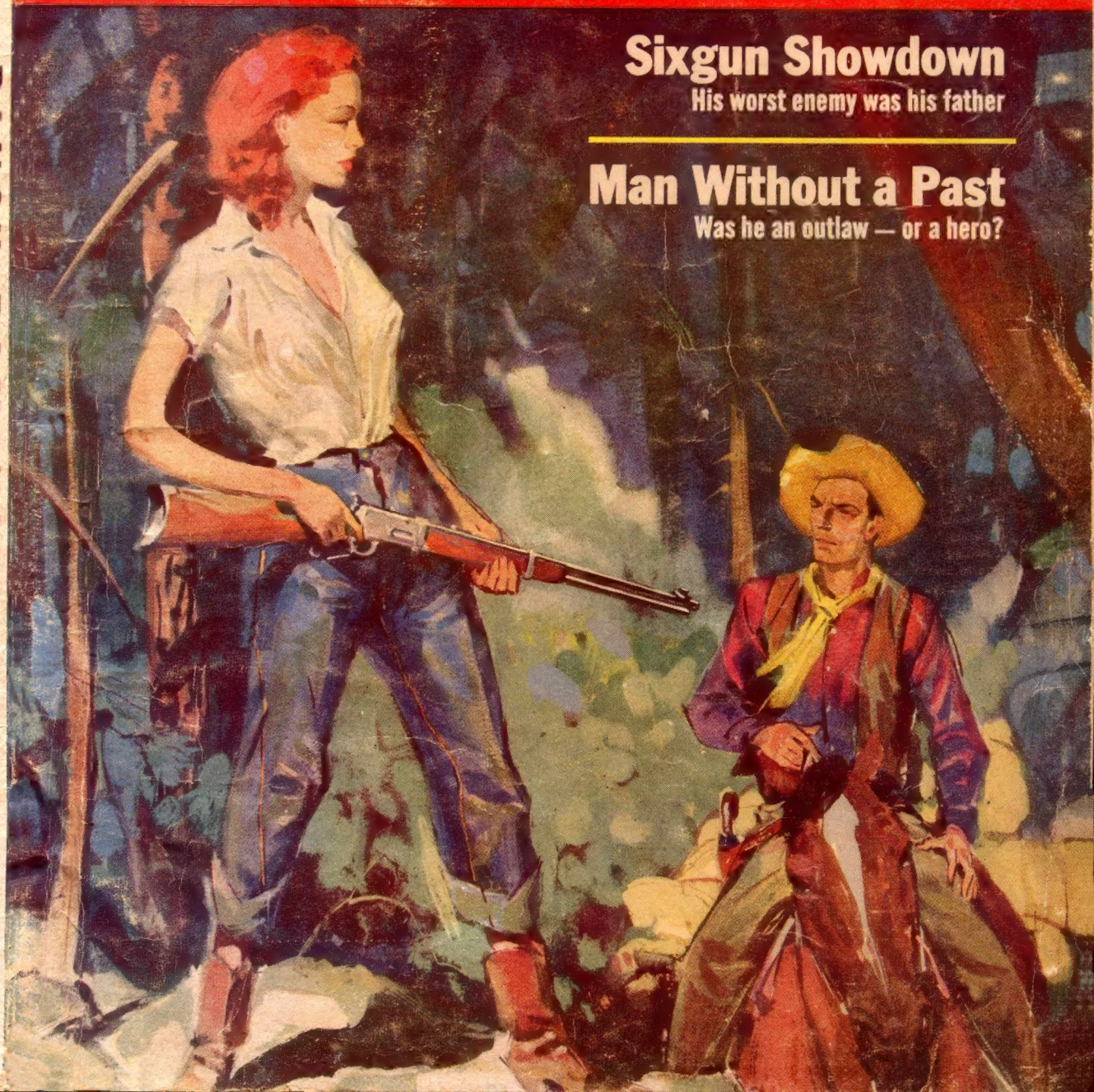
A THRILLING PUBLICATION
SECOND MAY ISSUE

25c

RANCH ROMANCES



Sixgun Showdown

His worst enemy was his father

Man Without a Past

Was he an outlaw — or a hero?

25c RANCH ROMANCES 2nd MAY 1957

Reducing Specialist Says: **LOSE WEIGHT** Where It Shows Most **REDUCE** MOST ANY PART OF THE BODY WITH

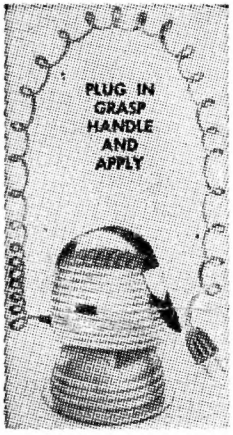
ELECTRIC Spot Reducer

Spot Reducer

Relaxing • Soothing Penetrating Massage

UNDERWRITERS LABORATORY APPROVED

FOR GREATEST BENEFIT IN REDUCING by massage use spot REDUCER with or without electricity—Also used as an aid in the relief of pains for which massage is indicated.



Take pounds off—keep slim and trim with Spot Reducer! Remarkable new invention which uses one of the most effective reducing methods employed by masseurs and turkish baths — MASSAGE!

TAKE OFF EXCESS WEIGHT!

Don't Stay FAT—You Can LOSE POUNDS and INCHES SAFELY Without Risking HEALTH

LIKE magic wand, the "Spot Reducer" obeys your every wish. Most any part of your body, where it is loose and flabby, wherever you have extra weight and inches, the "Spot Reducer" can aid you in acquiring a youthful, slender and graceful figure. The beauty of this scientifically designed Reducer is that the method is so simple and easy, the results quick, sure and harmless. No exercises or strict diets. No steambaths, drugs or laxatives.

With the SPOT REDUCER you can now enjoy the benefits of RELAXING, SOOTHING massage in the privacy of your own home. Simple to use—just plug in, grasp handle and apply over most any part of the body—stomach, hips, chest, neck, thighs, arms, buttocks, etc. The relaxing, soothing massage breaks down FATTY TISSUES, tones the muscles and flesh and the increased awakened blood circulation carries away waste fat—helps you regain and keep a firmer and more GRACEFUL FIGURE!

YOUR OWN PRIVATE MASSEUR AT HOME

When you use the Spot Reducer, it's almost like having your own private masseur at home. It's fun reducing this way! It not only helps you reduce and keep slim—but also aids in the relief of those types of aches and pains—and tired nerves that can be helped by massage! The Spot Reducer is handsomely made of light weight aluminum and rubber and truly a beautiful invention you will be thankful you own. AC 110 volts Underwriters Laboratory approved.

MAIL THIS 10 DAY FREE TRIAL COUPON NOW!

TRY THE SPOT REDUCER 10 DAYS FREE IN YOUR OWN HOME!

Mail this coupon with only $1 for your Spot Reducer on approval! Pay postman $8.95 plus delivery—or send $9.95 (full price) and we ship postage prepaid. Use it for ten days in your own home. Then if not delighted return Spot Reducer for full purchase price refund. Don't delay! You have nothing to lose—except ugly, embarrassing, undesirable pounds of FAT. MAIL COUPON now!

ALSO USE IT FOR ACHES AND PAINS

CAN'T SLEEP:

Relax with electric Spot Reducer. See how soothing its gentle massage can be. Helps you sleep when massage can be of benefit.

MUSCULAR ACHES:

A handy helper for transient relief of discomforts that can be aided by gentle, relaxing massage.

LOSE WEIGHT OR NO CHARGE

USED BY EXPERTS

Thousands have lost weight this way—in hips, abdomen, legs, arms, necks, buttocks, etc. The same method used by stage, screen and radio personalities and leading reducing salons The Spot Reducer can be used in your spare time in the privacy of your own room.

ORDER IT TODAY!

SENT ON APPROVAL—MAIL COUPON NOW!

BODY MASSAGER CO.
Dept. B-598
401 Market St., Newark, N. J.

Please send me the Spot Reducer for 10 days trial period. I enclose $1. Upon arrival I will pay postman only $8.95 plus postage and handling. If not delighted I may return SPOT REDUCER within 10 days for prompt refund of full purchase price.

☐ I enclose $12.98. Send DeLuxe Model.

Name.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

☐ SAVE POSTAGE—check here if you enclose $9.95 with coupon. We pay all postage and handling charges. Same money back guarantee applies.

LOSE WEIGHT OR NO CHARGE

FREE

30 DAYS SUPPLY

Safe High-Potency Nutritional Formula

VITAMINS

MINERALS AND AMINO ACID

25 proven ingredients—11 Vitamins (including Blood-Building B_{12} and Folic Acid), 11 Minerals, Choline, Inositol and Methionine

NOW YOURS FREE

Yes, we want to send you FREE a **30-day supply of high-potency** *Vitasafe C.F. Capsules* **(a $5.00 value) so you can discover for yourself how much healthier, happier and peppier you may feel after a few days' trial! Each capsule supplies your body with well over the minimum adult daily needs of the 11 important vitamins, plus 11 minerals, choline, inositol and amino acid.**

Potency and Purity Guaranteed

You can use these Capsules confidently because strict U. S. Government regulations demand that you get exactly what the label states—pure ingredients whose beneficial effects have been proven time and time again!

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With your free vitamins, we will send you complete details of an amazing new plan that provides you with a 30-day supply of vitamins every month for just $2.00—60% less than the usual retail price . But remember—*you're not obligated to buy from us now or ever!* The supply of free capsules is limited—so mail coupon today!

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Each Daily C. F. Capsule Contains:

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Vitamin D	1,000 USP Units
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Vitamin B_2	2.5 mg.
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Vitamin B_{12}	1 mcg.
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Folic Acid	0.5 mg.
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Phosphorus	58 mg.
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Cobalt	0.04 mg.
Copper	0.45 mg.
Manganese	0.5 mg.
Molybdenum	0.1 mg.
Iodine	0.075 mg.
Potassium	2 mg.
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Magnesium	3 mg.
Choline Bitartrate	31.4 mg.
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dl-Methionine	10 mg.

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VITASAFE CORP., Dept. 341A-2
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I ENCLOSE 25¢ (coins or stamps) to help pay for packing and postage.

Name.....

Address.....

City.....Zone.....State.....

This offer is limited to those who have never before taken advantage of this generous trial. Only one trial supply per family.

33rd Year
OF PUBLICATION

SECOND MAY NUMBER

May 17, 1957
Volume 204, No. 4

RANCH ROMANCES

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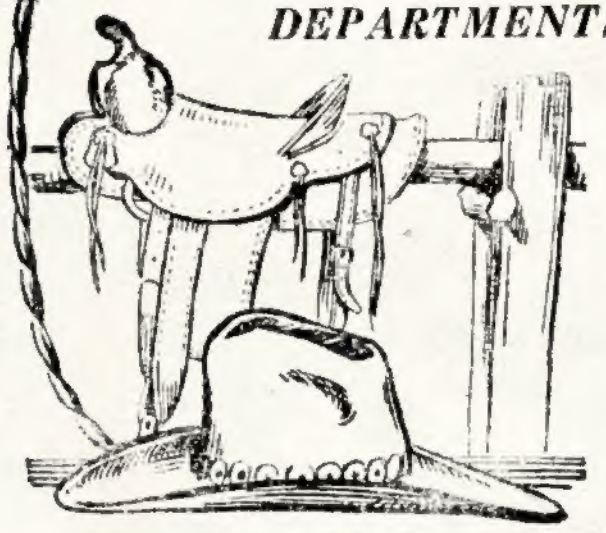

HELEN TONO
Editor

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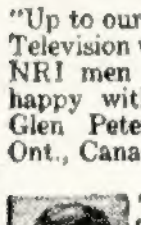
I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME FOR GOOD PAY JOBS IN RADIO-TELEVISION

J. E. SMITH has trained more men for Radio-Television than any other man, OUR 40th YEAR.

America's Fast Growing Industry Offers You Good Pay—Bright Future—Security

I TRAINED THESE MEN



"Started to repair sets six months after enrolling. Earned $12 to $15 a week in spare time."—Adam Kramlik, Jr., Sunneytown, Pennsylvania.

"Up to our necks in Radio-Television work. Four other NRI men work here. Am happy with my work."—Glen Peterson, Bradford, Ont., Canada.

"Am doing Radio and Television Servicing full time. Now have my own shop. I owe my success to N.R.I."—Curtis Stath, Ft. Madison, Iowa.

"Am with WCOC. NRI course can't be beat. No trouble passing 1st class Radio-phone license exam."—Jesse W. Parker, Meridian, Mississippi.

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Keep your job while training. I start sending you special booklets the day you enroll, that show you how to fix sets. Multitester built with parts I send helps you make $10, $15 a week extra fixing sets while training. Many start their own Radio-Television business with spare time earnings.

My Training Is Up-To-Date

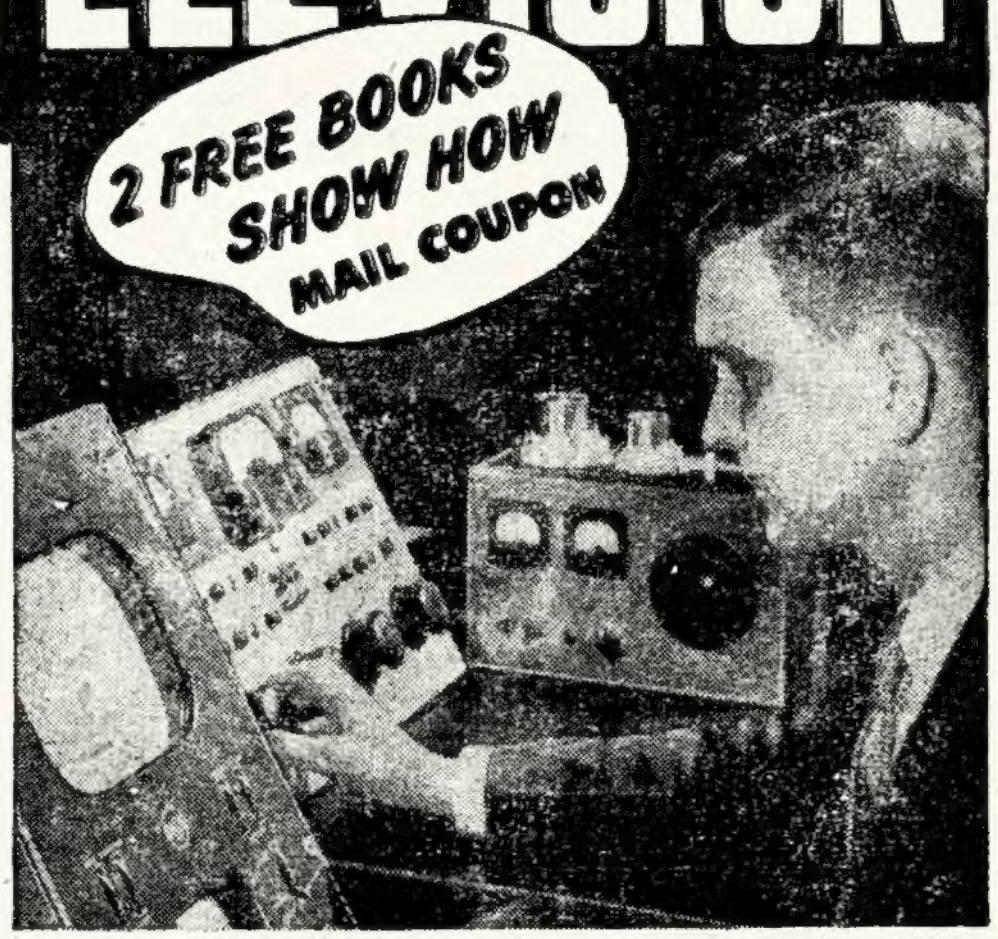
You benefit by my 40 years' experience training men at home. Well illustrated lessons give you basic principles you need. Skillfully developed kits of parts I send (see below) "bring to life" things you learn from lessons.

AVAILABLE TO VETERANS UNDER G.I. BILLS

You Learn by Practicing with Parts I Send

Nothing takes the place of PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE. That's why NRI training is based on LEARNING BY DOING. You use parts I furnish to build many circuits common to Radio and Television. As part of my Communications Course, you build many circuits, including low power transmitter shown at left. You put it "on the air," perform procedures required of broadcast operators. With my Servicing Course you build modern Radio, etc.; use Multitester you build to make money fixing sets in spare time while training. You can stay at home, keep your job, learn Radio-TV in spare time at low cost. Mail coupon for book showing other equipment you build and keep.

The Tested Way To Better Pay!



Television Making Good Jobs, Prosperity—Even without Television, Radio is bigger than ever. 115 million home and auto Radios are big market for servicing. 3000 broadcasting stations use operators, technicians. Government, Aviation, Police, Ship, Micro-wave Relay, Two-way Radio Communications for buses, taxis, trucks, R. R. are growing fields. Television is moving ahead fast.

About 200 Television stations are now on the air. Hundreds of others being built. Good TV jobs opening up for Technicians, Operators, etc.

25 million homes now have Television sets. Thousands more are being sold every week. Get a job or have your own business selling, installing, servicing.

Radio-TV Needs Men of Action—Mail Coupon

Without obligating you in any way, I'll send an actual lesson to prove that my training is practical, thorough; 64-page book to show good job opportunities for you in Radio-TV. Terms for NRI training are as low as $5 a month. Many graduates make more in two weeks than total cost of training. Mail coupon now. J. E. SMITH, President, National Radio Institute, Dept. 7FQ, Washington 9, D. C. OUR 40TH YEAR.

Good for Both—FREE

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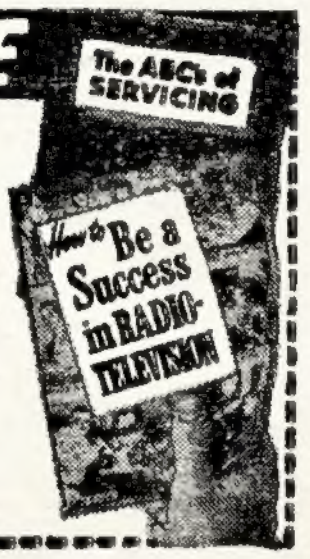
National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.
Mail me Sample Lesson and 64-page Book, FREE.
(No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

Name ..... Age .....

Address .....

City ..... Zone .... State .....

VETS write in date of discharge .....



Wants Letters

Dear Editor:

I am 36 years old, have dark hair and gray eyes. At present I'm fighting tuberculosis. I would welcome any letters received, and will answer each and every one.

RUTH CHASTAIN

435 So. Cedar Ave.
Room 308-E
Fresno, California

High School Boy

Dear Editor:

I am 14 years old, weigh 107 lbs., have brown hair and blue eyes, and stand 5'4" tall. I attend high school and would like to hear from gals and guys my age. My hobbies are fishing and collecting phonograph records. Come on, fill my mailbox.

DAVID PADEN

Star Route
Franklin, Pennsylvania

Wants Mail From the States

Dear Editor:

I have brown hair and hazel-green eyes, and stand 5'7" tall. Would like to correspond with gals and guys in their teens who live in the States. Will answer all those who write to me, and will exchange snapshots. Hope to see my mailbox full.

SYLVIA NICHOLSON

Mullinger, Saskatchewan
Canada

Handicapped

Dear Editor:

I am 20 years old, weigh 160 lbs., and stand 6'2" tall. Would appreciate hearing from gals and guys about my age. I can't get around too much, as I am handicapped. I'll answer all those who write to me, and I'm hoping to receive many letters.

JOHN SMITH

1107 North Boston
Tulsa 6, Oklahoma

Student

Dear Editor:

I would like to enter your column for pen pals. I am 14 years old, and have brown hair and blue eyes. I am in the ninth grade at school. Would like to hear from gals and guys all over the world, regardless of age. My hobbies include popular music and almost all sports. I promise to answer all those who write to me.

DIANA SUE BRISTOW

Rural Route 5
Owensboro, Kentucky

Keeps Trying

Dear Editor:

This is my third attempt to get into your column, and I hope I make it this time. I'm a male nurse and I get quite lonely at times. I'm 29 years old, 6'3" tall, weigh 182 lbs., and have brown hair and eyes. Will be glad to hear from men and women everywhere.

MARSHALL NORMAN

716 So. 18th Avenue
Humboldt, Tennessee

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 32 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Will Exchange Snapshots

Dear Editor:

I am in the Air Force at present, stationed in Italy. I am interested in making pen pals from all over the world. I have blond hair, stand 5'8" tall, and weigh 160 lbs. Please call me Jim; that's my middle name. It gets very lonesome here, and I would enjoy hearing from both men and women, regardless of age. Will exchange snapshots.

A/2C CLARENCE J. HEDGECOCK

AF 19444160
7273RD Ammo Sup SQ
APO 19
New York, N. Y.

Foreign Pen Pal

Dear Editor:

I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for quite some time now, and have enjoyed every issue. I would like to correspond with pen pals between the ages of 20 and 30, preferably women. My hobbies include collecting stamps, postcards, and newspapers; art; and traveling. All letters will be greatly appreciated, and I promise to answer all those who write to me.

DONALD J. KONG

1 Old Hope Road
Cross Roads. P. O.
St. Andrew
Kingston, Jamaica, B. W. I.

Air Force Man

Dear Editor:

I'm a Staff Sergeant in the Air Force who recently returned from Japan. At present I'm stationed in Texas, and do not know many people here. I get very lonesome at times, and would enjoy hearing from women between the ages of 21 to 30. I'm 29 years old, have brown hair and blue eyes, weigh 165 lbs., and stand 5'8" tall. I play the guitar, and enjoy listening to hillbilly and popular music. I'm also fond of photography. Will answer all letters received, and will exchange snapshots.

S/Sgt. THOMAS C. MING

AF 38724627 683rd AC & Wron
Sweetwater AFS, Texas

Collects Coins

Dear Editor:

I am 59 years old, have brown hair and blue eyes, weigh 139 lbs., and stand 5'2" tall. I'm a widow who does baby sitting to keep me occupied during the day. At night I get very lonesome, and I'd appreciate corresponding with pen pals, both men and women, regardless of age. I collect coins and stamps, and enjoy most sports. I'm looking forward to seeing my mailbox full.

THERESA SMITH

47729 Huron River Drive. W.
P. O. Box 155
Belleville, Michigan

Widower

Dear Editor:

I have been a happy reader of RANCH ROMANCES since 1930. I am now a lonely widower who would like to correspond with both men and women who are over 30. I am 50 years old, have brown hair and blue eyes, and weigh 160 lbs. Will answer all letters received.

CHARLES C. JACKSON

Peachtree Road
Gainesville, Georgia

Likes Horses

Dear Editor:

I work on a palomino horse ranch and don't get a chance to go out much. I do a lot of reading and listening to the radio. I started reading RANCH ROMANCES fifteen years ago and still enjoy it very much. I am 46 years old, stand 5'7" tall, have sandy-colored hair and greenish-gray eyes, and weigh 152 lbs. My hobby is training and riding horses. All letters are welcome, and I'll answer all those I receive.

ALFRED PRITCHARD

c/o Ben C. Benton
1526 W. El Caminito Drive
Phoenix, Arizona

Wants Mail

Dear Editor:

I am 23 years old, stand 5'9" tall, have blond hair and blue eyes, and weigh 150 lbs. At present I'm stationed at Okinawa and don't receive much mail. Would like to hear from gals and guys between the ages of 18 and 23. Will answer promptly all letters received.

RAY FRADY

Sgt. Ray Frady 1380410
C. co 3rd Shore Party BN.
3rd Marine Div. F.M.F.
c/o F.P.O. San Francisco, Calif.

Likes Our Magazine

Dear Editor:

I've been reading your magazine for about five years and find it's a pretty darn good publication. I wonder if you'll print my plea in your column. Are there some girls who would like to write to a lonely chap? I'm 32 years old, single, weigh 160 lbs., and am 5'11" tall. Photography is one of my hobbies, and I also like hiking.

STEPHEN LUDKOWVICH

12-35 35th Avenue
Long Island City 6, New York

Lovely Lady

Dear Editor:

I need your help in obtaining some pen pals, as one of my main hobbies is corresponding with people, regardless of age, color or religion. I'm 21 years old, 5'7" tall, and have blonde hair and hazel eyes. I like all sports and also like to dance, swim, and watch TV and the movies. So come on, everyone, write to me.

JANICE TRUMAN

P. O. Box 113
Santa Susana, California

West Point Cadet

Dear Editor:

Have read RANCH ROMANCES for some time now and would like very much to be listed among your pen pals. I'm 20 years old, 6'1" tall, and have brown hair and gray eyes. I'm now at West Point, and would love to receive a lot of letters. I come from Texas, so I feel a long way from home.

SAMMY CARDWELL

Company G-1
U.S.M.A.
West Point, New York

The Bashful Type

Dear Editor:

I'm in the service and would like to get into your column, as I don't receive much mail. You see, I'm bashful, so it's a little difficult for me to make friends. I'm 39 years old, 5'6" tall, weigh 165 lbs., and have dark brown hair and hazel eyes. Am willing to answer all letters, and will exchange snapshots.

Sgt. WOODRAW SEABOURN

Co. B. 16, Sig. Bn.
Ft. Hvachvic, Arizona
RA 38230123

Determined Miss

Dear Editor:

I've tried before to make your column, and certainly hope I succeed this time. I'm 17 years old, 5'6" tall, weigh 123 lbs., and have dark brown hair and eyes. I'm a high school senior. My likes include listening to popular and hillbilly music, collecting stamps, and doing just about everything there is to do outdoors. Would like to hear from boys and girls from other countries.

SANDY CASTELLI

2273 Yorkshire Drive
Homepark Add.
Decatur, Illinois

From Far-Off India

Dear Editor:

I'm 24 years old, 5'6" tall, have dark brown hair and light brown eyes. I'm a Merchant Navy officer from Pakistan, and would like to hear from all those who would be interested in writing to me. My main hobbies are collecting snapshots and stamps. Will answer all letters that I receive.

KENNETH THEO TELLIS

4th Engineer Officer
S/S "Ocean Endurance"
c/o Major J. U. Tellis
G.R.E. 183, Britto Road
Carachi 5, India

At the regular single copy price, you'd pay $4.00 for the next 16 issues of RANCH ROMANCES. But use the coupon below and these same 16 exciting issues cost you only $2.99 . . . and you enjoy the convenience of having them delivered right to your door in the bargain.

It's the biggest reading value you can get—16 exciting novels . . . 16 more novelettes . . . 64 thrill-packed short-stories . . . the best in Western serials . . . Bob Cummings' Ranch Flicker Talk . . . the popular "Air Mail" column . . . 16 Western crosswords . . . and much more — **all for only $2.99!**

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Yes, enter my RANCH ROMANCES subscription for the next 32 weeks (16 issues) at only $2.99 . . . a money-saving rate that brings me the equivalent of 4 issues as a gift. My $2.99 is enclosed. 5-2

Name_____

Address_____

City_____ Zone___ State_____

(Add 50¢ for Canadian postage: $1.00 for foreign)

TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item: in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

TRYING to establish friendly relations with his mother-in-law, a Norman, Okla., man bought her a birthday cake. But his good intentions came to naught; at the birthday gathering, it was discovered that the cake was a "dummy"—a pan covered with icing for a window display.

FOR want of a dime, a Yakima, Wash., man lost his chance to be a hero. As he was sitting in a tavern, a hold-up man came in and stuck up the bartender. The man ducked down behind the bar and inched his way into a pay telephone booth, only to find that he didn't have the right change to make a call to the police.

MAYBE it's his suspicious mind, but the police radio dispatcher in Albuquerque, N. Mex., recently broadcast this bit of advice to all cars: "If you see a man carrying a cash register, arrest him."

ARRESTED for drunkenness and for stealing a parking lot sign, a Los Angeles, Calif., man put up a strong defense. He claimed he needed the sign more than the parking lot did. It read: "Sorry, full."

BECAUSE the barber refused to give him a haircut "just like Daddy's," a three-year-old Oklahoma City, Okla., boy finished the job at home with scissors. His father has a bald area down the middle of his head.

EXPLANATION given by a St. Louis, Mo., man while on trial for having drilled 33 holes in 32 doors in four apartment buildings: "I was driving along and I saw a beautiful girl. I just had to see her again."

SENT out to arrest a drunk, a Dallas, Tex., patrolman was diverted from his duty by seeing a speeder. He gave chase, and finally bagged the speeder—who turned out to be the drunk he had been sent to arrest in the first place.

REVENGE is sweet, even for a muskrat. When a logging party invaded his private pond near Old Ship, Newfoundland, the animal took action. He gnawed through the rope holding a batch of cut logs together, and the logs scattered to hell and gone all over the lake.

IT TOOK twenty years, but a Los Altos, Calif., man's good deed finally paid off. In 1937 the man, working as a soda jerk, used to oblige a customer—an old lady with a germ phobia—by always washing her cup in boiling water. Recently the ex-soda jerk learned that he had been left $1,000 in the old lady' will.

STYLE note for deer: two boys in Manistee, Mich., who have been feeding a deer have dressed it in a band of red material during the hunting season, hoping to keep it safe from sportsmen's bullets.

ROUNDUP
of Western Movies, Music and TV

LIFE in Hollywood (on location) Department: *The Tin Star*, starring Henry Fonda and new teen-age heart throb Anthony Perkins, is the first Paramount movie to be shot entirely out of doors. Completed in seven weeks, it was interrupted by only one rainy day. Chamber of Commerce, please note . . . When Columbia's *3:10 to Yuma* was being shot near Tucson, the State Highway Department's blasting of granite nearby was a constant interruption—until, with Arizona National Guard help, blasting and film-making sessions were co-ordinated to avoid interference with each other. You might call that a case of the national guard's arriving on time to squelch the villain even before the bad guys started shooting it out with the good guys.

After finishing *The Big Land* for Warner Brothers, Alan Ladd took off on The Big Trip —a jaunt to Europe with wife Sue and the children. In the meantime, we thought you'd like to hear about this super-duper new movie, a still from which appears above. (Reading from left to right, that's Edmond O'Brien and Alan.)

The Big Land takes place right after the Civil War, when ex-Confederate soldier Chad Morgan (Alan Ladd) brings a herd to the railhead in Missouri. There hostile Northern cattle buyers offer him a tenth of what his cattle is worth. Sick of fighting after the long war years, Morgan sells his herd to tough Brog (Anthony Caruso) and rides off.

Morgan is befriended by Jagger (Edmond O'Brien) a hard-drinking hombre who is caught stealing whisky that night. Morgan saves Jagger from a hangman's rope and the two escape into Kansas and the home of Sven Johnson (John Qualen) and his widowed daughter-in-law Kate (Julie Bishop). When talk turns to the need of a new railhead, Draper (Don Castle), a friend of Jagger and

a railroad man, agrees to build a spur track into southern Kansas. Jagger, once an architect, will build a town at the new railhead, with cattle pens and a hotel; and Morgan will try to organize Texas cattlemen to use the new distance-saving spur.

In Kansas City Morgan meets Jagger's sister Helen (Virginia Mayo) a singer, and he again meets Brog. Knowing the new town's competition will ruin him, Brog has his gunnies burn down the almost completed buildings the next day, after he sees Morgan ride out of town with Jagger, Helen and Draper. But Sven persuades the frightened townsfolk to start rebuilding immediately.

Cattle and wheat buyers start arriving from the East, and Morgan rides in with the Texans and their herds. Morgan learns that Jagger has been killed by Brog, and Helen turns against him for being partly responsible for her brother's death. That night Brog and his henchmen stampede the herds, and Morgan is just in time to save David, Kate's son, from the terrorized cattle. When Morgan sights Brog, both men draw, and Morgan kills Brog just as the other man fires. Helen, who finds where her heart lies when she hears of the gunfight, walks into Morgan's willing arms.

The stampede in *The Big Land* is one of the most exciting scenes ever filmed; wranglers claim these were the skinniest, spookiest, meanest critters they'd ever handled. The movie is all-out tremendous, splashed across a vast WarnerColor canvas, and the excellent cast brings the rugged railroad town to life. Alan Ladd's nine-year-old son, in his first screen appearance, plays the part of David, and everyone figures that he'll follow in his famous daddy's footsteps as an action star.

Other New Westerns to Watch For: Paramount's *The Last Train to Harper's Junction*, stars Earl Holliman (remember his good work in *The Rainmaker?*) . . . Promising newcomer Paul Newman portrays *Billy The Kid* in Warner Brothers' upcoming version of the life of the famous outlaw. It's a wonderful saga of the man who is probably America's favorite badman "hero" . . . John Wayne plans to produce a full-length picture based on TV's *Gunsmoke*, with James Arness starring in the film, as he does in the television series . . . Always dependable Randolph Scott turns in his usual accomplished performance in Warners' *Shootout at Medicine Bend*, whose action concerns the immigrant trains that broke new Western frontiers in pre-Civil War days.

A special tip of the Stetson is due to another new action film that'll be arriving at your local theatre shortly. It's Columbia's *Utah Blaine*, which stars Rory Calhoun (in the title role), and has enough spectacular action to satisfy the most Western-thirsty.

The excitement never stops from the time Utah escapes a Mexican firing squad, after taking part in an unsuccessful revolution. North of the border, Utah runs into trouble too, in the shape of a gang headed by Russ Nevers (Ray Teal) who are trying to lynch an old man and grab his ranch. Staying out of the reach of the badmen, while aiding his new friend, keeps Utah hopping till the end of the picture—and will have you chewing your nails in suspense till the final reel.

Country Music and Musicmakers: Tommy Hill's folk and Western records are sure bets for hillbilly fans. A native Texan, Tommy is 28, and has been making music for twelve years. He started in radio in San Antonio, moved ahead with brother Kenny to join Smiley Burnette; later formed his own band. Still later, he and his sister joined the Louisiana Hayride.

First platter: *The Life That I'm Living* and *Love Me, Baby*. He's composed many folk and Western numbers, among them *Slowly* and *I Let The Stars Get In My Eyes*. Versatile as any Texan, Tommy also plays the guitar, fiddle, mandolin and bass. He is tall, dark, handsome—and married. Hickory makes his platters, which are selling like hotcakes. . . .

Horseback rider Helen Carter records for Hickory, too. This lovely blonde hails from Virginia, and lights birthday candles on September 12. A guitarist from the time she was knee high, Helen took up the accordion and then other musical instruments; she has also composed countless songs which she sings with an angel's voice, and does the arrangements she and her sisters record. She likes housework, gardening and swimming, besides

singing—but enjoys horseback riding best of all. . . .

Al Terry and two brothers played for local fiestas while still in high school; now Al becomes more of a hit with every Hickory release. After school, Al left his home town of Kaplan, Louisiana, and headed for Beaumont, Texas, and radio school. He announced and sang, made personal appearances, and has worked with nearly all of the big names in country music. *Good Deal, Lucille,* was his first platter, and started him up a national popularity ladder he's still climbing. . . .

Starday Records cuts plates for George Jones, the pride of Grand Ole Opry. George comes out of Beaumont, Texas. *Why, Baby, Why,* one of his first, skyrocketed to the top of the national hit charts in the country-music field, and his next few recordings (*You Gotta Be My Baby, Ragged But Right,* etc.) had the nation sitting up and taking notice. Soon after, George joined Grand Ole Opry, where more people got to know him through this top showcase window. *Just One More* was among the top ten jukebox tunes for 1956. George is a new artist with a new style; watch for his up-coming records.

Capitol's platter of *Young Love* by Sonny James hit a bull's eye in popularity, and country-music fans have gone all out for this top vocalist. *You're The Reason,* the other side of *Young Love,* is a sweet, swaying, romantic ballad with a country flavor. His latest are *Twenty Feet of Muddy Water* backed by *For Rent*—and both are smashers.

Westerns on TV are coming into their own. They're no longer the good guy-bad guy simple shootout, but have developed appeal for big as well as little people by packing realism and some history, along with the wallops, into story lines. A nice innovation is their admission that cowboys can go for pretty gals as well as for trusty horses.

If you haven't caught ABC's *Cheyenne,* starring Clint Walker, you're missing something. Clint is a well-rounded Westerner; his

Sonny James . . . he's the tops

boyhood was spent along the Mississippi, he served with the Merchant Marine, was a deputy sheriff in Las Vegas, a cattle puncher in Texas, and a prospector in Nevada. He's a well-developed specimen, standing a neat six-six, and weighing 235 pounds. Married at 21, he now has a little daughter, Valerie Jean, who, her daddy notwithstanding, still thinks Wyatt Earp is the best cowboy who ever lived.

Speaking of Mr. Earp, ABC's *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp* stretches realism to the point where the star, Hugh O'Brien, resembles old photos of that well-known marshal. Hugh was born in Rochester, New York, but grew up all around the country. He gave up studying law at Yale after one stint with a little theater group. Ida Lupino spotted him when he was with the famous Lobero Theatre in Santa Barbara, California, playing with such stars as Edna Best, Sylvia Sidney, and Wendell Corey. He was launched into movies, then TV, including the Wyatt Earp series, where he proves that a true Western marshal can enforce law and order against all odds. Hugh is an even six feet, weighs 175, has his birthdays on April 19. Dark hair and eyes add to his good looks.

Gunsmoke, starring James Arness, is another thrilling TV series, over CBS-TV. An

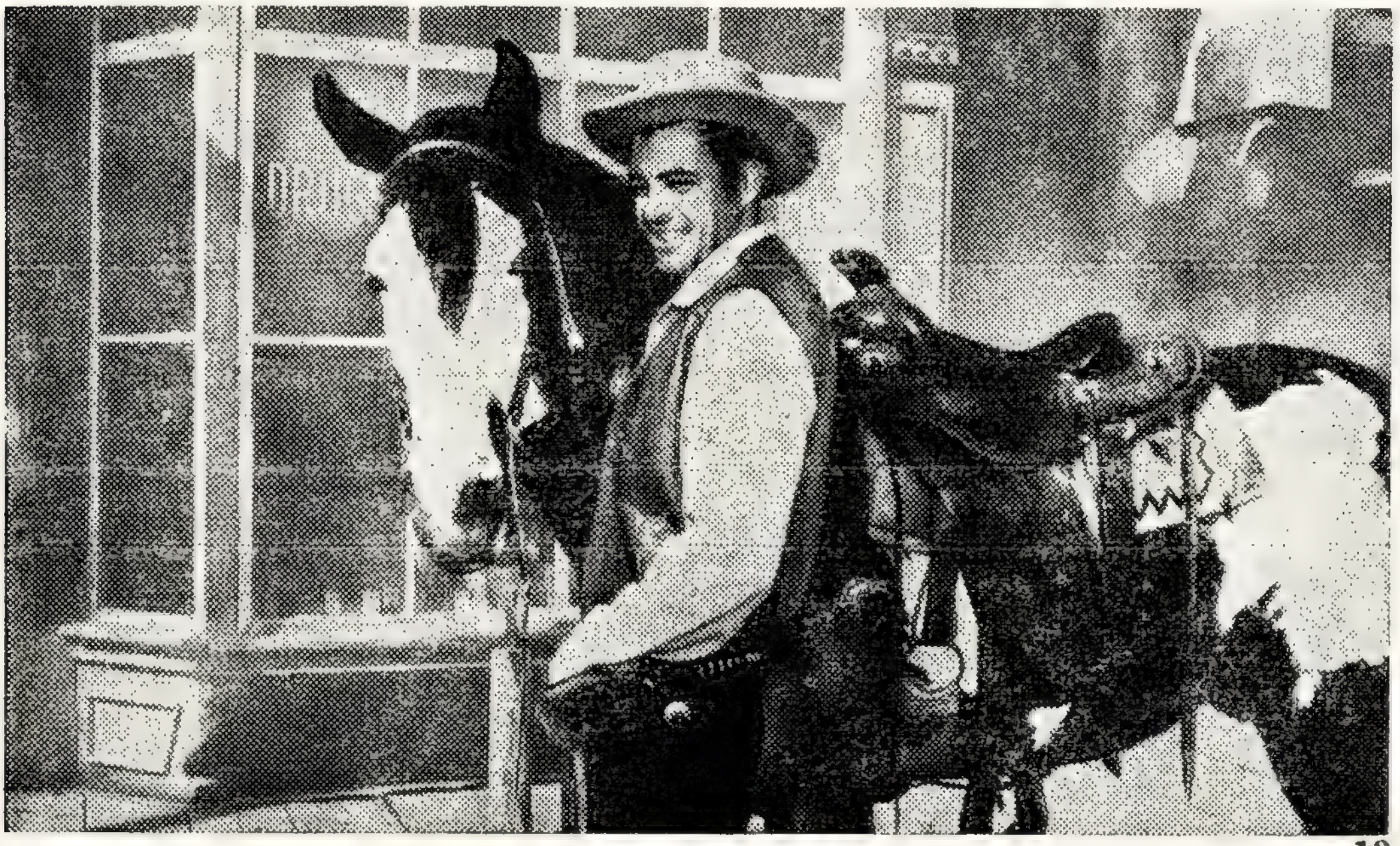
Impressive six foot six, James met John Wayne when "Duke" needed a big man for the movie *Big Jim McClain.* Duke Wayne was so impressed by James's willingness to learn and his natural ability to act that he took him under his wing. Everyone comments that James's mannerisms and makeup resemble Duke's more and more, and everyone, including Duke, predict that James will step into Duke's boots one of these days and find them a perfect fit. In *Gunsmoke* he portrays a lawman during that violent period in our history when the frontiers were being shoved westward, and when a gun carried a lot more weight than a sheriff's badge.

TV Incidentals: A million dollars was spent in producing the first thirty-nine telefilms of *The Lone Ranger* for ABC . . . The *Dick Powell's Zane Grey Theatre* series is a sure bet for fans of the West and, in fact, anyone who likes good acting. This CBS feature has top-flight stars every time, depicting the rugged days of the Old West when horse thievery and stagecoach robbery were all in a day's work—and any lawman had to have eyes in the back of his head, as well as a hair-trigger gun in his hand . . . Warner Brothers' TV division, which now produces the previously mentioned full-hour *Cheyenne* series, is adding two more Westerns of the same length to its schedule.

First to roll under this program is *Sugarfoot,* starring newcomer Will Hutchins, with Merry Anders handling the feminine lead. Going into production soon after is *Maverick* (formerly called *Colt 45).* Pro football star Frank Gifford will make his acting debut in this. A starting date some time next fall is planned for *Maverick* . . . Screen actor John Payne is planning to star himself in his independent producing company's new TV series *Sixshooter.*

Elvis Presley worked so hard on the set of Paramount's movie *Loving You* that his weight dropped from a hefty 180 lbs. to a svelte 168. But relax, girls—there's still enough of Elvis left for you to admire . . . Bill Willams, who often plays gun-toting heroes in the movies, is slated to act as narrator on two forthcoming records of Western tales for children. With three offspring of his own, Bill's an old hand at story-telling to the younger set.

Quiet moments like this are rare for Rory (Utah Blaine) Calhoun



Sixgun Showdown

By EDWIN BOOTH

ONLY ONE THING held Neil Wallace to the father he hated . . . his love for Warbird Ranch, which might someday be his

SOMETHING was wrong. Neil knew that as soon as he stepped off the train onto the cinders of the platform. It was in the eyes of the men who stood there watching him—men who were almost strangers, although a couple of them—Hub Talbert for one—were vaguely familiar even after eleven years. It was in their attitudes too, in the way they drew away from him into a tight little knot.

Neil let his eyes move beyond them toward the short main street of the town, lying hot and dusty between two rows of false-fronted buildings. The town hadn't changed greatly. Maybe the buildings seemed a little smaller, but that was only natural. He'd been just a boy when he'd gone away.

He let his gaze settle on a man who was sitting in a buckboard just beyond the depot—a big man, hard-faced and lean. He had an odd grin on his face, but he was a stranger to Neil. Neil looked back at the group on the platform,

and laid down the saddle which he had slung across his shoulder. He took a step forward, holding out his hand.

"I'm Neil Wallace, Mr. Talbert. I reckon you don't remember me."

Talbert's eyes met his for a second, then fell away. He was a little man, his forehead furrowed by a perpetual frown, his shoulders a little more rounded than Neil remembered them. He licked his lips and nodded.

"I remember you, Neil." He glanced around uneasily at the others in the group, then held out a reluctant hand. "It's been quite a while."

Neil was reaching for Talbert's hand when the stranger in the buckboard said sharply, "Don't touch him, Wallace. You'd just get yourself dirty."

Surprised and a little angry, Neil looked up to see the stranger motioning at him, apparently wanting him to get into the buckboard. He looked back at Talbert, but the little man had turned and started away, followed by the others, their backs stiff with anger. Yet none of them had offered any resistance.

It was a strange way to act, unless the man in the buckboard had them buffaloed. Neil sucked in his breath. This was a hell of a way to come home, after all these years—not at all the way he had wanted it.

He picked up his saddle and crossed to the buckboard, dropping the gear in the back along with his bedroll. Rounding the buckboard, he got in beside the driver, who slapped the lines on the team's rumps and wheeled the vehicle into the street.

They reached the end of town, and the team broke into a trot. The driver turned and held out his hand. "I'm Flake Bridger, Wallace—your old man's ramrod." He grinned, but Neil had the feeling that he wasn't too friendly. "If you're wondering why I butted in back there, your old man can set you straight. All those men hate your guts, but there wasn't time to explain."

Neil shook hands briefly, still a little angry. "Funny," he said, "I don't recall ever having trouble with anybody around here."

Bridger shrugged. "You're a Wallace, that's all they need to know. There are things going on around here that you don't know about."

He seemed content to let it rest there, and Neil let the matter drop. Warbird was too big a prize to risk by getting into a fight with his father's foreman. Besides, there probably *were* things he didn't know about this part of the country. Eleven years can bring about changes in anything.

He thought about his father, then, wondering what the years had done to him. He remembered his father as a big, rock-fisted man whom other men respected. That much had been evident even to a boy. He was still proud of being King Wallace's son, even though his mother had kept him away from Wyoming all these years.

The road followed San Juan Creek, where Neil had caught his first trout years before. Three miles from town a side road crossed the creek over a wooden bridge and angled off to the south. That would be Will Turner's Broken Bow Ranch, where Neil and Marcia Turner had played together as children.

Neil remembered Will Turner well, a quiet, soft-spoken man who was almost too gentle for this country. He remembered Marcia, a funny little girl with big teeth and freckles. Just thinking about her made him grin.

A little farther on, the Warbird road turned off to the north, leaving the creek and crossing a big hogback which lay like a sleeping giant the length of the valley, dividing Warbird land in two parts. As the horses slowed for the climb, Neil looked over to the west and imagined he could see a faint wisp of smoke from somebody's cookshack. That would be Stubby Stubblefield's place, the Box-S, which lay at the extreme west end of the valley.

Bridger stopped the team at the ridge to let them blow. He pointed down the north side of the hogback. "There it is, Wallace. I don't guess it's changed much."

"No."

Neil leaned forward to stare at the Warbird buildings, sprawling haphazardly in the flat below, and his gaze gravitated naturally to the main house, a huge structure with immense wooden pillars supporting a veranda. It had been King Wallace's wedding gift to his bride from the East, a sort of symbol for all the world to see, proof that King had made good his boast of becoming the biggest rancher in the territory.

Yet Neil was vaguely disappointed. It was big, all right, but there was nothing inviting about it, no personality. Still, that could be changed, once it was his.

They went on down the slope then and stopped in front of the house, where King Wallace stood solidly on the porch, frowning down at them in concentration. Neil saw that his father was as big and tough as he remembered him.

His heavy shoulders strained at the seams of the brush jacket he was wearing, his jaw was thrust forward truculently. Neil started to leave the buckboard, but his father's voice stopped him.

"Throw your gear in the bunkhouse," King said. "Then come over and see me in my office." He turned and walked heavily across the porch and into the house.

NEIL saw Bridger looking as though he were secretly amused at something. Then Bridger looked away, and stirred the team into motion. At the bunkhouse, he pulled them to a stop.

"Help yourself to a bunk, Wallace. The crew's up at the dam, but you'll be able to see which bunk isn't being used."

"Sure."

Neil got down and took his bedroll out of the wagon. He entered the bunkhouse and tossed the roll on an empty bunk, then walked out to the big house. His father was waiting for him in the office, a big bare room that looked out on the yard in front of the house. King studied him for several seconds without speaking, then reached in his pocket for a cigar, bit off the end savagely, and spit on the floor.

"So you came back," he said. "I reckon I ought to say you're welcome, but I'm not so sure you are."

Neil frowned. "I thought—"

"Never mind what you thought. Probably your mother told you I wanted you back, but you can't believe a woman, even when she's dying." He scratched a match on the top of his desk and touched it to the end of the cigar. "Maybe I *did* want you back, Neil. I always wanted a son who could take over Warbird some day, but I'm not sure you're the man to do it, after being mollycoddled by your mother all these years." He took the cigar out of his mouth and used it for a pointer. "Tell me, boy, what've you been doing since your mother took you away?"

It was not the kind of reception Neil had expected, but he said calmly, "For the first few years I went to school in St. Louis. Afterward Mother wanted me to take a job in a bank, but I just lasted a week."

The old man frowned. "Couldn't you hang onto a job any longer than that?"

Neil grinned wryly at the recollection. "I hit a man. I didn't know he was the boss's son."

For a second there was a trace of a smile on King's face, but he quickly smothered it. "And then what?"

"Then I took a job with a freighting outfit going to Kansas. I could've had a steady job, but I wanted to get into ranching, so I hired on as a rider at a place near Dodge. That's where I've been the last three years."

King frowned. "Three years punching cows—that's not much to brag about."

Neil flushed. "I wasn't bragging. You just asked me a question, and I answered it. If you're not satisfied, quit beating around the bush and say so. I have a foreman's job waiting for me back in Kansas. Just say the word, and I'll leave."

"Foreman?" King's eyebrows lifted. "Then maybe your mother didn't spoil you as bad as I thought." He threw his cigar into a spittoon. "All right, you're welcome to stay, provided you're willing to take orders. What bothers me is that you may be like your mother—too damned soft to make a go of it. Out here a man has to stand up on his hind legs and fight, even if it means fighting his friends."

Neil remembered the men at the depot, and knew what King was driving at. He was about to say so when a voice called sharply from out front, "Here they come, boss."

King crossed to the window in two quick strides and stared out. Then he turned toward Neil. "We'll finish this later, boy. Right now I have something else to attend to." He stalked out of the room and across the front hall.

Puzzled, Neil crossed to the window and looked out. Riding down the slope were eight or nine men, with Will Turner in the lead.

looking grimmer than Neil remembered him but otherwise unchanged. Beside him was Dutch Shortinghuis, a rancher Neil remembered faintly.

King came off the porch and took a stand beside his foreman in the middle of the yard. The horsemen came up to within ten paces or so and stopped at a signal from Will Turner, who looked at King and nodded.

"I won't wait for an invitation to get down," he said. "Besides, what I have to say can be said from the saddle." He motioned at the men behind him. "You know these fellers, King. They're all what you call two-bit ranchers—the same kind you used to be before you got big ideas."

Dutch Shortinghuis interrupted impatiently, "Get to the point, Will. We didn't come out here to listen to a speech."

Turner frowned for a second, then shrugged. "All right, Dutch. I guess I forgot myself for a minute." He turned back toward King. "It's about that ditch you're digging. Every one of us knows what you could do with it if you've a mind to. We'd like to hear it from your own lips."

King let his eyes travel from man to man. Some of them, like Will Turner and Dutch Shortinghuis, returned the stare without flinching. Others, including Hub Talbert, looked away. After his deliberate scrutiny, King looked back at Will.

"You're forgetting something, aren't you? What I do on Warbird is nobody's business. In fact you have no right even coming here to ask me about it."

Some of the men shifted uneasily and seemed about to turn away, but Will Turner paid no attention to them. "You can't put us off that easy, King. We came here for an honest answer, and we aim to get it."

King's eyes narrowed, and the color rose in

FRANCESCA

KING WALLACE

WILL TURNER

his cheeks. Neil instinctively let his hand drop to his side before he remembered that his gun was out in the bunkhouse in his warbag. He looked around the room and saw an old Henry hanging on a bracket.

"All right, Will," King said. "Since you're bound to push things, I'll tell you. I'm going to throw the creek back into its old channel. I need the water."

Turner was obviously trying to control his temper, but Dutch Shortinghuis leaned forward in the saddle and began to curse. Neil turned and ran for the Henry, knowing that only one false move was needed to start a battle. He jabbed the muzzle of the Henry through the window.

"Sit tight!" he yelled. "I'll blast the first man that moves."

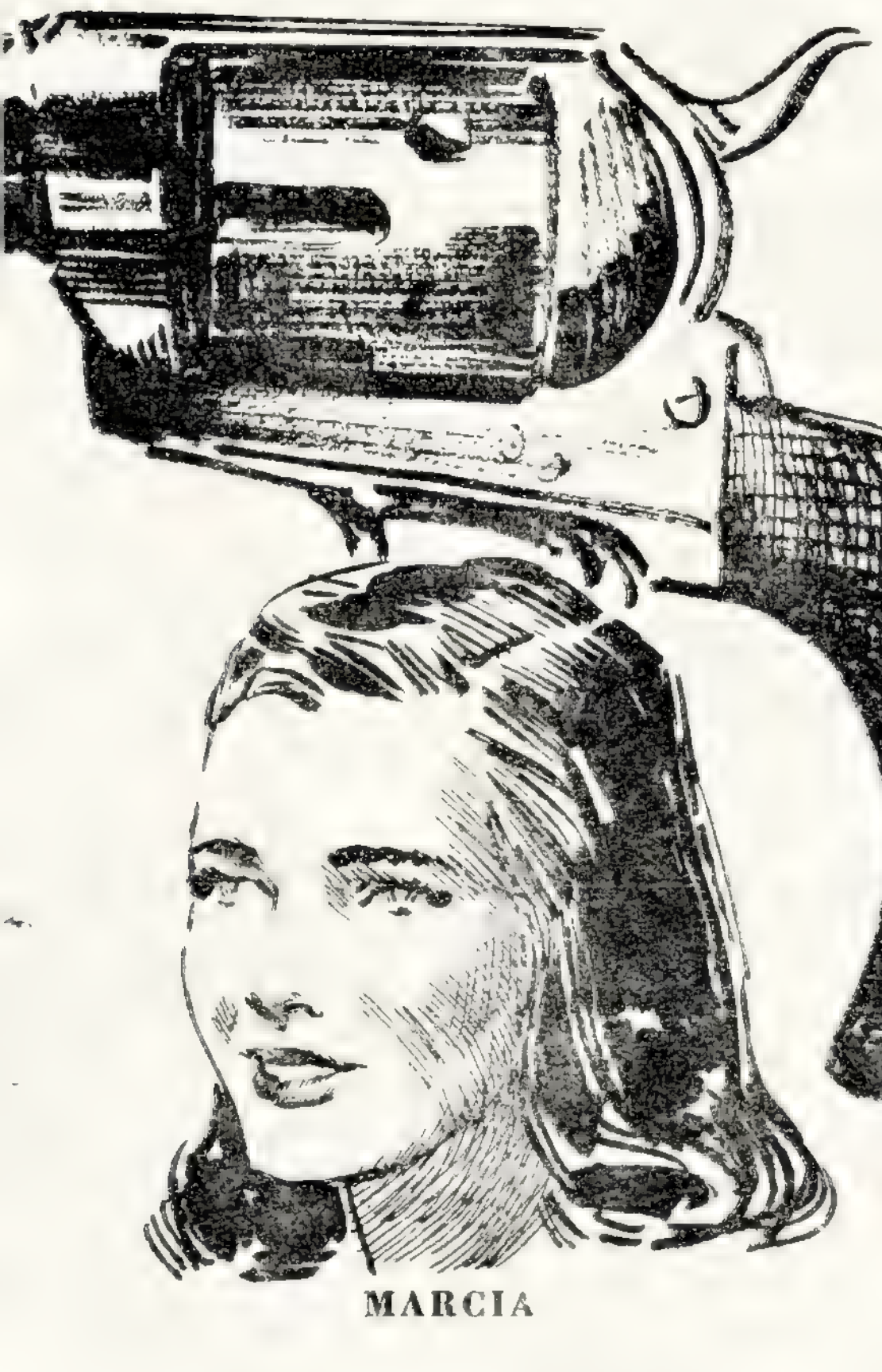
The riders turned startled eyes toward the window, where the ugly snout of the Henry stared at them menacingly. Will Turner looked at Neil and let out his breath in a sigh.

"All right, men," he said. "We've been outfoxed. We'll have to go back to town and turn it over to the law."

"The law!" Dutch said bitterly. "A hell of a lot of good that'll do, with Mulholland in Wallace's pocket."

"We have no choice," Will said. "Go on now, before somebody gets hurt." He waited until the others had started up the hill, then rode over beside the window. "You can lower the gun, Neil. I reckon your father and Bridger could back-shoot me if I made a try for my Colt."

Neil lowered the gun, hating the look in Will's eyes, but knowing there was nothing



MARCIA

NEIL WALLACE

he could do about it without giving up everything he had come back for.

WILL shook his head. "I'm sorry it came to this, Neil. I haven't forgotten the old days, when you and Marcia played together over at Broken Bow. In fact we've talked about you a lot since you went away." He broke off suddenly, and his voice became harsh. "It's all over now, since you've sided your father in his dirty work. I'll have to ask you to stay away from Broken Bow. Stay away from Marcia, too. You've turned out just the way King wanted you to."

Neil said, "That's up to you, Mr. Turner. I'm not ashamed of being a Wallace, if that's what you expect me to say."

Will looked at him for a moment, then turned and rode up the slope without a backward glance. Neil crossed the office and put the Henry back in place, then turned to see his father and Bridger entering the room. The rancher was smiling grimly.

"You told 'em, by heaven! Now they know whose side you're on."

Neil saw Bridger's grin, and said hotly, "Next time don't walk into a set-up like that and expect me to get you out of it." He glanced at the ramrod. "*Nobody's* fast enough with a gun to buck those odds."

Bridger's grin broadened. "Wait and see, kid. Wait and see."

Neil turned toward his father. "That stuff about the ditch— What was Mr. Turner talking about?"

King hooked his thumbs in his gunbelt. "That's right, boy—you don't know about the ditch." He rocked forward on the balls of his feet. "You remember the old creekbed, the one where the creek used to run before that big slide pushed it out of its banks?"

Neil nodded. The slide was before his time, but he had played in the dry creekbed which crossed Warbird land on the north side of the hogback.

"Well, I'm diverting the creek back where it was. I've had most of my crew working on the job all summer." He unhooked his right thumb and jabbed Neil in the chest. "I'll show those damned two-bit ranchers what it costs to laugh at King Wallace!"

Neil frowned. "Laugh? What do you mean?"

King's face tightened. "That's right, laugh. They used to say things about me behind my back—things about my pretending to be a big operator, but not being able to hang onto my wife. Damn their dirty little souls! I've taught 'em not to poke fun at anybody from Warbird. It's cost me money, but I have more. There are a dozen mules pulling scrapers up where the slide was, and I'll get a hundred more if I need 'em. I'll tear out the whole side of the hills if I have to." He stopped for breath.

Neil was a little stunned. King had always been aggressive, but nothing he had ever done compared with this. "About needing the water," he said. "That was just talk, wasn't it? Warbird never needed that creek."

King nodded. "Sure it was, boy, and they know it. But they *do* need it, or their cattle will die like flies." He stomped over and sat down behind his desk. "And I'll let 'em die, or buy 'em out for ten cents on the dollar. I'll have those tinhorns begging before I'm done, and then I'll spit in their faces." He looked up beligerently. "Do you have any objections?"

Neil weighed his answer. Being tough was one thing, and experience had shown him that it was a necessary quality if you wanted to get ahead. But taking a man's water supply just for spite was something else. Still, there was Warbird to consider. If he played along with his father, he stood to inherit the ranch. Let the ranchers suffer a little if necessary—once the place was his, he'd make it up to them.

He grinned. "Hell, it's your ranch. I'm not telling you how to run it." He turned toward the door. "I'm going over to get my gun. It looks as if I might be needing it if I'm going to stay around here."

"Go ahead," King said. "Then get back as quick as you can, and we'll go to town. We'll show those bastards we're not scared of 'em."

Neil crossed the hallway, frowning. If there had to be a war, why did Will Turner have to be in on it? Will had been almost like a second father to Neil, a kind-hearted father whose influence supplied what King's lacked. And Neil hated the thought that Marcia was going to despise him. Marcia had been a sweet kid, for all her freckles and knobby elbows. He was so involved in his thoughts that he almost bumped into a woman on the porch steps.

"I'm sorry." He reached up to touch his hatbrim, then froze in mid-motion. "Francesca!"

"Hello, Neil." She smiled at him gently, her eyes alight with pleasure. "I'm glad you're back."

Neil grabbed her in his arms "I never dreamed you'd still be on Warbird."

"I'm still here, Neil." There was just a trace of Spanish accent in her voice, which was soft and musical. She reached up to touch a stray wisp of hair, and Neil saw that it was just beginning to turn gray. "Let me look at you, Neil. You've changed so much."

Neil grinned. "It's just that there's more of me, Francesca." His grin faded. "I suppose you know about my mother's dying?"

"Yes." She sobered instantly. "Your father told me." She frowned. "It was the first time he mentioned her since she took you away. It hurt him terribly when she left."

"I suppose so." Neil touched her cheek. "How about you? Have *you* been happy?"

"Happy?" Francesca bit her lip. "Why yes, Neil, I suppose so. Things haven't turned out exactly the way I'd hoped." She smiled. "Anyway, it's good to have you back. Maybe you can brighten things up around Warbird."

There was a subdued sadness in her voice, and it troubled him. He glanced back at the door. "King wants me to go to town with him now, Francesca. I think he's in a hurry."

"Then you'd better go, Neil. King likes to have his own way."

She was smiling, but Neil felt that there was something unspoken behind her words. Could it be that she was in love with King? That would account for her still being here, after all these years. And what she had said about things not turning out exactly the way they were supposed to— Had she expected King to marry her when his wife died? Neil shook his head. She was too good for King, but he doubted if King would ever think of marrying his housekeeper.

Behind him, he heard heavy boots on the porch, and he hurried into the bunkhouse. When he came out, wearing his gun, King was already mounted and was impatiently holding the reins of another saddled sorrel.

As Neil took the reins, he noticed that the saddle was his. It irritated him for some reason, making him feel as though he were being led around by the nose. But he said nothing about it, and they took off toward town.

IT WAS the first time Neil had been in Frank Diamond's saloon, but he remembered having seen the man looking out over the batwings. Diamond had drifted West after the war, and had liked it well enough to stay. He was talking with two men at one end of the bar when Neil and his father entered, but he left the men immediately and came over to greet them.

"Howdy, Mr. Wallace," he said respectfully.

"Hello, Diamond." King motioned toward Neil. "You may remember my boy. He's been away for a while."

The saloonman nodded. "Welcome home, Neil. I hear you've been back East." He held out his hand across the bar.

"Just Kansas, mostly," Neil said, shaking Diamond's hand.

"Now there's a state you can have," Diamond said. "It was so hot when I—"

King suddenly pushed Neil aside and stared at the men at the other end of the bar. "Do you fellers have something on your minds?"

Surprised, Neil turned to look. The two strangers were watching, but there seemed nothing odd about that. One of the men put down his drink and licked his lips nervously. The other deliberately finished his drink and put the glass on the bar.

"Us?" he said. "You know you wouldn't be interested, *Mister* Wallace. Not a big feller like you." He nodded at his companion, and they left the saloon.

King swore. "Who *is* that man?" he demanded.

Diamond shrugged. "Some drifter, I guess." He laid his hands on the bar. "What'll you gentlemen have?"

"Two whiskys," King said, without giving Neil a chance to answer for himself.

Neil grinned. His father was going to be a little hard to get used to, but it wasn't worth arguing about. He picked up the glass that Diamond set in front of him.

King reached for the half-empty bottle and hurled it into the mirror behind the bar. "That's for lying to me, Diamond; you

should've known better. Now who *was* that feller?"

Neil stared unbelievingly at the shattered mirror, then at Frank Diamond's suddenly white face. The act had been so unnecessary that it left him a little stunned. Surprisingly, Diamond's answer was mild.

"He's a man by the name of Suggs," he said woodenly. "He works for Dutch Shortinghuis."

Without answering, King picked up his glass and drained it. He glanced at Neil. "Hurry up, boy. We want to get to the cafe while they're still open."

There was nothing in his voice to indicate any emotion, and Neil felt a finger of doubt. He put down his drink without tasting it and followed King out the door, half expecting Diamond to empty a shotgun into their backs.

King stepped into the street and headed toward the cafe directly opposite. A little shaky, Neil followed him. It was pretty clear that King was used to making the decisions. Halfway across, Neil glanced along the sidewalk in time to see a girl entering the mercantile beyond the cafe. She paused in the doorway to let someone pass, and Neil stopped in his tracks.

King beckoned from the sidewalk. "Come along, boy."

Neil joined him. "That girl," he said, "the one who just entered the store, looks sort of familiar."

King frowned. "That's Marcia Turner." He took Neil's arm. "Come on, now. You have nothing to say to her."

Neil pulled his arm loose. "We might as well understand each other." he said. "On Warbird, you give the orders. Any place else I'll do as I please." He turned and headed for the mercantile. Behind him the cafe door banged loudly.

She was looking at some dress goods when Neil came in, a tall, softly rounded girl who seemed unconscious of her beauty. Neil moved in front of her and took off his hat.

"Hello. Marcia."

She made no pretense of being surprised. "Hello, Neil." Her voice was polite, but there was no warmth in it.

Neil reached for her hand. but she moved it away, in what appeared to be an unconscious gesture. Neil flushed, aware that others in the store were watching. "You've changed, Marcia," he said. "I suppose you know that."

She nodded. "You've changed too, Neil. Dad told me what happened at Warbird a little while ago." A frown disturbed the smoothness of her forehead. "I never thought you'd use a gun against your old friends."

"Somebody had to stop it." Neil felt his temper slipping. "I couldn't just stand there and see somebody shot."

"No, I suppose not." She gave him a level look. "Did it strike you that your father or Flake Bridger would be the ones who'd start the trouble?" When he didn't answer immediately, she went on, "Never mind, Neil. You've decided which side you're on. After all, you *are* a Wallace." She turned away and motioned to the storekeeper. "I think I've found what I want, Mr. Sutherland."

Neil looked around at the grinning customers, wanting to hit someone, but finding no excuse for doing it. He turned and walked stiffly out of the store.

King was seated at table near the front of the cafe. He looked up as Neil came in, his eyes bitter. "Did you find out for yourself? Damn it, I told you you'd be making a mistake. Now you have people laughing at us."

Neil didn't answer. King was right, but it didn't make him feel any better to admit it. Besides, his thoughts were filled with Marcia, so beautiful and so unapproachable. He pushed back his plate and saw that King was waiting for him. Most of the other diners had already left.

Outside, King stopped so abruptly that Neil almost bumped into him. Looking past him, he saw Dutch Shortinghuis coming across the street, his broad face almost scarlet. Shortinghuis had a sixgun in his hand, and looked mad enough to use it. He reached the middle of the street and stopped.

"They said you were in town, Wallace. This time you're going to listen." His eyes flashed briefly to Neil. "And don't count on your kid to do anything about it, unless you want him dead."

"Start talking," King said, and Neil had to admire his composure. "I'm in a hurry."

"You're always in a hurry," Dutch said heatedly. "Just see to it you're not in too

much of a hurry for your own good." He brushed a hand across his cheek. "What I want to tell you is this—if you cut off that water, I'll kill you! I'm not going to let my family starve because you're a land hog."

ACROSS the street, a man had come out of the saloon, and Neil saw that he was wearing a star. The man said suddenly, "All right, Dutch, I've got you covered. Drop that gun!"

Shortinghuis seemed almost desperate enough to ignore the warning, but he cursed and let his gun fall into the dirt. "Damn you, Mulholland, why don't you let me be?"

"If you act as if you have good sense, I will." The lawman stepped up and retrieved Shortinghuis's gun. "Come on, Dutch; you're going to jail."

"Turn him loose," King said angrily. "I'm not afraid of scum like him."

Neil saw the marshal flush, and was sorry for him. What he had done seemed like a good thing, but King gave no sign that he appreciated it. The marshal hesitated a moment, then motioned for Dutch to go.

"Sure, Marshal," Dutch said sarcastically. "Anything you say. Anything your boss tells you to say, that is." He turned and walked away.

King gestured toward the marshal. "This is Cal Mulholland, Neil. Cal, this is my boy."

"Howdy." The marshal didn't meet Neil's eyes, and it was apparent that he was still rankling from being humiliated by King. He turned and went back into the saloon.

King looked after Dutch's retreating form. "Dirty clod hopper," he said. "Come on, let's go." He headed for the hitchrail.

Neil followed, and was about to step into the saddle when a man came out of the mercantile waving a piece of paper.

"Neil Wallace?" he asked. Neil nodded. "Here's a letter that came in on today's train. I heard you were in town."

"Thanks."

Neil opened the envelope and took out a sheet of pink paper. He read the note and began to grin. Nobody but Delight would do a thing like this—send a letter on the same train he was coming in on. He looked up and saw his father frowning at him questioningly.

"It's from a girl in St. Louis," Neil said. "Someone I met at a party last year. Here, you can see what she says."

King reached for the letter and spread it out on the saddlehorn. After reading it, he looked down at Neil for several seconds. "This Delight," he said, "what's she to you?"

"Just a friend," Neil said. "After the party I didn't meet her again until I went back to the funeral last month."

King glanced at the letter again. "From the way she writes, she'd like a chance to visit Warbird."

"It's just her way," Neil said. "I told her about the ranch." He grinned. "I guess I bragged a little. She'll forget all about it by next week."

King turned to look back toward the mercantile, and his expression changed. "Go ahead and invite her, boy. We'll show these tinhorns we don't have to depend on them for anything."

"But there's no reason—"

"Who said you needed a reason? Go ahead; we have plenty of room. We'll go to the depot and you can send her a telegram."

Neil couldn't help feeling that King had some unexpressed reason for his sudden burst of hospitality, but there was nothing in it to which he could object, so he sent the telegram. Once it was done, he began to get a little excited. Delight DuBois was enough to excite any man.

At the Warbird turnoff, King reined up and waited for Neil to come alongside. "We'll go right on to Box-S," he said. "You'll be wanting to see this dam you've heard about." He lifted his reins and took off up the main road. There was nothing for Neil to do but follow, although he wondered why it wouldn't be easier to take the shorter route through Warbird. At any rate, this route would give him a chance to renew his acquaintance with the countryside.

As they came within sight of Box-S, they heard a pistol shot. King spurred his horse into a gallop and they angled off toward the dam, where several men were huddled around another man who was on the ground. One of the men held a gun in his hand. As Neil and his father rode up, he holstered the gun and turned to face them.

King reined up and leaned over to look at the downed man, who was glaring up at him. Neil was surprised to recognize the man as Corky Brill, who had been Warbird's foreman when Neil went away. Corky was gray-haired now, but he still looked capable.

"What happened?" King demanded, directing the question at Bridger, who was standing at Corky's feet.

The foreman glanced at the man with the gun. "Tell him about it, Ace."

"Sure." Ace looked up at King. "You know how Corky's been, boss, ever since we started working on this deal. All he's done is throw monkey wrenches in the machinery. Well, today I braced him with it, and he went for his gun. I was a little faster."

King frowned. "How about it, Bridger? Is that the way you saw it?"

Bridger nodded. "That's right, boss. Corky asked for it."

King looked at Corky. "What's *your* story, Brill?"

The little puncher frowned. "It doesn't matter. You believe what they've already told you." He tried to sit up, but couldn't make it. Neil stepped out of the saddle and went to his aid, and Corky grinned. "Neil! It's been a long time."

"Eleven years," Neil said. He glanced up at his father. "Isn't there some way we can get Corky to a bed?"

King motioned to one of the punchers. "Go borrow Stubby's wagon, Forbush." He looked at Neil. "Come along, boy. I'll show you what I'm doing here."

Corky muttered something Neil couldn't understand, but indicated that he could get along without any help. Neil mounted and followed King to a spot where the creek had been partially blocked by rocks. Additional tons of rocks were stacked along the edges of the creek, ready to be put into place. King turned in the saddle and looked at Neil proudly.

"Here it is, boy. Another few days' work on the old channel and I'll be all set to dam the creek."

Neil looked at him without answering. The plan was simple enough. Several scrapers were gouging out a ditch through the slide which had long ago pushed the creek out of its banks and forced it to form a new channel. When the ditch was completed, the water could be turned back into the original riverbed, and the little ranches would be deprived of their water. The idea gave him no pleasure, but he made no comment. This was King's problem, not Neil's.

HE TURNED to watch a wagon clatter from the direction of Stubby's ranch buildings. He left King and rode over to help Forbush lift Corky into the back of the wagon, trying not to hurt his wounded leg. The sweat popped out on Corky's face, but he grinned at the other puncher.

"Take it easy, Duane," he said. "I'm not made of wood."

Duane Forbush grinned back at him. "Don't worry, Corky, I'm not going to let you die while you owe me five dollars." He climbed onto the seat and gathered up the reins.

Neil watched the wagon leave, then turned to see that King and Bridger were having an animated conversation at the damsite. A little disgusted with the whole business, he headed for Warbird, taking the short cut along the north side of the hogback.

He reached the ranch in time to tell Francesca what had happened, before the wagon arrived by the longer route. Francesca insisted on fixing a bed for Corky in the main house, and by the time it was ready the wagon had come into the yard.

Neil went out and helped Duane carry the puncher into the house, where Francesca was waiting with hot water and clean cloth for bandages. She worked rapidly, then straightened up and turned toward Duane.

"There's a bottle of whisky in the kitchen cupboard. Bring it up here, please."

Corky raised his head. "And see to it you don't bring any of it in your belly."

Duane winked and left the room, to be followed by Francesca. Corky looked up at Neil soberly. "You should've stayed away, Neil. There's nothing but trouble on Warbird now."

"Then I'll feel right at home," Neil said. He lowered his voice. "What actually happened up there at the dam? You wouldn't be dumb enough to draw against a man who has gunslinger written all over him, like that man Ace does."

Neil put his hand over the horse's muzzle lest it betray his presence

Corky swore. "Damn Ace Pollock anyway!" He propped himself on one elbow. "He's a feller Bridger put on the payroll, and they make a good pair. Both of 'em are as mean as hell." He frowned. "You're right, Neil. I didn't start things. I had good reason, all right, but I'm not interested in getting myself shot up. This was all Pollock's doing, plain and simple. But you noticed how Bridger backed him up."

There were footsteps on the stairs, and Neil crossed over to the door. But it was just Duane with the whisky. He entered the room and handed the bottle to Corky, who took a hearty drink. "Ask Duane. He knows."

Duane frowned. "About Bridger and Pollock? They're up to something, all right." He looked at Neil. "They know Corky's against the dam business, and they're liable to try for him again." He shook his head. "They're not crazy about you, either. I think Bridger figured on getting something out of this for him-

self. With you, it might not work out."

It was a conjecture to think about later. Right now it seemed more important to take care of Corky. So Neil said, "I'll move into the house for awhile, where I can keep an eye on things. My old room's just down the hall. I'll come out and get my gear later."

"Fair enough."

Duane left, and Neil saw that Corky was about to go to sleep, probably as a reaction to the shooting, plus the whisky he had drunk. Neil pulled a chair over by the window and sat down. Presently Corky began to snore.

The afternoon wore on, and Neil heard the Warbird crew ride into the yard. Francesca came up with a tray of food, and Corky awoke long enough to eat his supper, while Neil ate his own meal beside the bed. Francesca lingered, apparently reluctant to leave.

Neil said, "Where's King? Hasn't he come back?"

She shook her head. "He seldom eats in the house, Neil. He's probably out checking the new ditch. That's about all he thinks of nowadays." She left then, walking softly down the corridor to her little room at the back of the house.

After a bit, Duane came in. "I figured one of us ought to be here," he said. "You'll be wanting to get your warbag."

Neil left the house and crossed over to the bunkhouse. Several of the punchers were sitting on the edge of their bunks. One of these was Ace Pollock, who was cleaning a gun. Flake Bridger was seated at a crude poker table with three other men. He saw Neil and got to his feet.

"Break it up, men. We've got company."

Neil could understand the resentment on the men's faces at the intimation that they owed him some special respect. He wanted to say something to soften the effect, but Bridger added quickly, "This is Neil Wallace, men. He doesn't eat in the cookshack like we do, so you haven't met him." He took Neil's arm and led him to the nearest bunk. "This is Cobb Phillips, Wallace."

The puncher looked up at Neil and nodded. "Pleased t'meecha, Wallace." He shook Neil's hand unenthusiastically.

Bridger went on as though he hadn't noticed. "This is Ace Pollock, my segundo."

Ace looked up at Neil and grinned slyly. "Howdy, Wallace. I can't shake hands. Wouldn't want to get your hands dirty."

Somebody chuckled, and Neil turned to look around the room, then back at Pollock. "That's all right, Ace: I expected to find a little dirt. I've been with Corky Brill all afternoon."

Pollock's lips thinned. He half rose from his bunk, then sat down again.

"What's the matter?" Neil asked dryly. "Too many witnesses?"

The room was breathlessly quiet until Bridger said loudly, "Go on with your game, men. What the hell!"

Neil looked around the room and thought he detected a few friendly eyes. He picked up his bedroll and left the building. Behind him he heard Bridger say angrily, "Damn it, Ace, don't you have any brains at all?"

He crossed the yard, entered the house, and went directly upstairs. Duane's cigarette tip glowed. Duane said gruffly, "He's asleep. Do you reckon one of us ought to ride herd on him?"

"No," Neil said. "If they try anything tonight, it won't be Corky they're after." He caught Duane's sleeve. "Watch yourself, cowboy. You and Corky seem to be friends, and there may be some who'll hold that against you."

"Hell," Duane said bluntly, "I reckon I can still decide who's my friend and who isn't." He felt for Neil's hand in the darkness. "Good night, friend."

Neil gripped his fingers. "Good night, cowboy." He wanted to say more, but knew that Duane would be embarrassed. He listened to Duane's steps on the stairway, then moved on down the hall to his room.

SOME time after midnight, Neil was awakened by a dull boom which rattled his bedroom windows. He lay still for a moment, thinking it might be repeated, then jumped out of bed as a door banged open and Corky let out a groan. Neil ran out into the hallway and saw his father outlined against lamplight from a bedroom beyond the head of the stairs.

King cursed. "Somebody's dynamited the dam!"

Neil stuck his head into Corky's room. "Are you all right?"

"I reckon," Corky said. "Something woke me up, and I tried to get out of bed. I forgot all about my bum leg."

"King thinks they've blown up the dam," Neil said. "You just lie low."

He ran back to his room and put on his clothes. King met him at the head of the stairs and they raced down to the yard. The rancher shouted for Bridger, who burst out of the bunkhouse with his sixgun in his hand.

"Everybody out!" King yelled. "Shortinghuis blown up the dam! I didn't think he had the guts."

Men poured out of the bunkhouse, some of them only half dressed, but none without his gunbelt. Neil grabbed Duane as he went by. "You'd better stay here where you can watch Corky. I have to go with the crew."

Duane hesitated briefly, then drifted into the shadows. Neil followed the others to the horsebarn. Bridger called out a few names, and told those men to stay and guard the ranch. The rest were soon in their saddles, King in front on a big black. They pounded out of the yard and headed for Box-S. As they neared the dam, King called a halt.

"Don't go too close. We might find some tracks." He raised his voice. "Stubby, are you here?"

"I'm here, King. I was waiting to see who you fellers were." A match flared, and Stubblefield touched it to the wick of a lantern, which flickered into light.

King turned in the saddle. "Take a look, Philips. You're good at reading sign."

"Sure, boss."

The man Neil had met in the bunkhouse dismounted and took Stubby's lantern. He bent low beside the creek, which had spread to its original width now that the dam was shattered. When he straightened up he was grinning.

"I'd know that hoofprint anywhere, boss. Nobody else rides as big a horse as Dutch Shortinghuis."

King rose in his stirrups. "Come on, men. We'll catch him before he knows we're onto him!" He whirled his mount and took off at a gallop.

Presently they came to a turnoff and rode under an unpainted archway. King motioned for the men to slow down. "Spread out. Dutch has a shotgun, and he's probably expecting us." He pulled in his own animal some ten paces from the door, with Bridger on his left and Neil on the right. "Come out, Dutch!" he yelled. "We know you're in there."

The door opened and Dutch stepped into the yard, a shotgun cradled across his left arm. In the moonlight Neil could see the anger on his face. "Who the devil d'you think you are," he demanded, "hollering in the middle of the night like this and waking up my wife and kids?"

King leaned across the saddlehorn. "Don't talk like a fool," he said harshly. "We know what you did at the dam."

Neil thought Dutch looked surprised. "I didn't do anything to your dam. I've been right here in the house."

Bridger laughed tauntingly. "With your clothes on, Dutch? Why you dirty, lying—" He grabbed for his gun, and it came out blazing.

Dutch spun crazily as Bridger's bullet caught him in the arm. The shotgun went off and someone screamed. Neil turned and saw a man pitch out of a saddle. He looked back at the house. Dutch was gone.

One of the men was cursing softly. "Why'd Dutch have to kill Cobb Phillips?"

Neil looked at his father. "Chances are he didn't aim at anybody. He was hit before he fired."

King scowled. "What's the difference? He hit one of my men." He motioned toward the door. "Get the woman and kids out, Neil. You other men, surround the house."

Neil stepped out of his saddle and pounded on the door, his hand on his gun. There was a moment's pause; then the door opened. A heavy woman clutching a faded bathrobe around her shoulders stepped out into the dirt.

"Go away and leave us alone," she said quietly. "There's nobody here but me and the babies, and we haven't hurt anybody."

"Make her send Dutch out," King ordered.

The woman crossed over to where he was sitting and looked up at him. "You're King Wallace. I don't suppose you know when a person's telling the truth, you're such a liar yourself."

King looked at Neil. "He's in there someplace. Make her bring the kids out."

"You'd better get them," Neil said, hating himself, "or make your husband come out where we can see him. I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "All right. The babies are scared half to death as it is, with the shooting and all." She disappeared into the house, returning presently with a baby in her arms and two older children behind her.

"All right, boy. Flush him out."

Neil smiled bleakly. He could refuse, and be branded a coward, or he could go in and face a shotgun blast. It didn't leave him much choice. He stepped into the house and moved away from the open doorway. A crack of light showed under a door at the far side of the room, and he moved quickly across and kicked the door open.

The room was empty and the light came from a lamp on the table. A book was open before the lamp. Neil glanced at it and found that it was written in some foreign language. Even so, he could tell that it was a bible. He holstered his gun and completed his inspection of the house without finding anyone.

WHEN he told King the house was empty, King swung out of the saddle. "Damn him," he said, "he must've gone out the back before we had the place covered."

He pushed past Neil and into the house. Grabbing up the lamp, he examined the house himself, his boots pounding on the bare floor. Then he came back to the front room and scowled at Neil, who was still in the doorway.

"The dirty skunk!"

He hurled the lamp on the floor, shattering it. Neil started toward it instinctively, but the spilled coal oil caught fire and forced him back. Almost immediately the window curtains were a mass of flame.

"That'll show 'em!" King said. "Come on, we've got to get out of here."

Disgusted, Neil followed his father from the house. Mrs. Shortinghuis and the children were staring round-eyed at the flames, and Neil was a little sickened. He circled the house and went into the barn, where he found two work horses and a big farm wagon. A few minutes later he drove the team out of the barn and around the burning house. Dutch's wife looked at him dazedly.

"Get in," Neil said. "I'll take you to some neighbor's place."

The woman shook her head. "There's no place we can go. We have no friends around here."

"Then I'll take you to Will Turner's. He'll let you stay."

She nodded. "The Turners are nice folks. The girl always speaks to me in town."

She motioned for the older children—a girl of about six and a boy a little older—to get in the back of the wagon. She herself climbed onto the seat, refusing Neil's help.

Neil called to one of the punchers, "Tie my horse to the wagon, will you?"

The puncher looked at King, who gave no indication of approval or disapproval, then brought Neil's animal to the wagon. He was about to tie it, but Dutch's boy said solemnly, "I'll hold him, mister," and took the reins.

Neil drove out of the yard and headed for Turner's, the woman sitting silently beside him. He wanted to say something consoling, but knew she wouldn't understand. They turned in at Broken Bow.

Neil cupped his hands to his mouth and called, "This is Neil Wallace. I'm coming in."

The door opened and Will Turner stepped into the yard, a rifle across his arm. "I told you to stay away from here, Neil."

"I have the Shortinghuis family with me," Neil said, thinking how different this reception was from the last time he had been here. "Their place burned."

"Good heavens!" Will Turner leaned his gun against the house and hurried to meet them. "How'd it happen?"

The woman moved uneasily. "King Wallace set it afire," she said. "They shot Dutch."

Moonlight glinted on another rifle then, and Marcia came out of the house, a thin robe over her nightgown. She put down the rifle and crossed quickly to the wagon, her eyes troubled.

"You poor thing," she said softly. "Here, let me take the baby."

As she raised her arms the robe fell apart, and Neil turned away quickly, relieved that the boy said just then, "What'll I do with these reins, mister?"

"Just let 'em drop."

Neil turned and found Turner looking up at him. "Tell me about it, Neil," he said.

Neil did, relating the story without trying to make it any pleasanter. When he finished, Mrs. Shortinghuis said hotly, "It's a lie. Dutch didn't leave the house all night."

Will Turner shook his head solemnly. "I'm sorry, Neil, but I don't think this woman is a liar."

Marcia said suddenly, "Regardless of who's lying, you know you're on the wrong side." She reached up impulsively and laid a hand on Neil's. "Leave Warbird, Neil. Just because your father's crazy for power doesn't mean you have to go along with him."

He looked at her hand, thrilling to the touch. Maybe she was right; maybe King was crazy. But King was his father. Then there was the ranch to consider. He shook his head.

"I wish I could, Marcia."

She withdrew her hand and turned toward the house. Will Turner stared at him coldly. "All right, Neil, you'd better go. I'll take care of the team.

Neil got out of the wagon and stepped into his saddle. He left the ranch without even looking back, but he kept remembering Marcia's expression.

When he reached Warbird he was too disturbed to sleep. At the first sign of daylight he looked in on Corky and then quietly left the house. He saddled horse and rode out without arousing anyone.

The thought had occurred to him that there had been no saddlehorse in Dutch's barn—only the two work horses. Since no one had heard Dutch ride away, it was possible that the animal whose tracks Cobb Phillips had identified had never gone back to Dutch's place after the dynamiting.

In that case, Dutch might have been telling the truth about being home all night. The horse might have been ridden by someone else—say the man Suggs who had been in Diamond's saloon.

The Shortinghuis place smelled of charred wood and the house was only a mass of ashes, but the barn stood as Neil had left it, the big doors wide open. Neil tied his horse to a tree and went in, his sixgun in his hand.

He waited for his eyes to adjust themselves to the dimness, then examined each stall carefully. It seemed unlikely, but Dutch might be here. He might have hidden until the Warbird crew left.

The search was unsuccessful, and Neil was about to leave when he remembered the haymow. He found a ladder which consisted of cleats nailed across two studs, and holstered his gun to leave his hands free. There was a trap door at the top and he pushed it open. He climbed the last few rungs rapidly, although he really expected no trouble. He was in the loft and had stepped away from the opening when something hard jabbed his back.

NEIL whirled and slammed the gun aside with his arm, at the same time lunging at his unseen antagonist. They went down in a heap, Neil clawing for the gun.

From across the room a voice called worriedly, "Are you all right, Marcia?"

Marcia! Neil was surprised into carelessness, and the figure beneath him twisted aside. He remembered the gun then, and made a grab for it. Marcia fell across his chest, her soft hair in his eyes, her cheek against his. For a moment they were both quiet. Then he found her lips with his, and she sighed softly.

"Marcia!" Dutch sounded desperate now. "What's going on?"

She let go of the gun then and got to her feet. "It's all right, Dutch. Stay where you are."

Neil got up and reached for her in the darkness, but she pulled away. "All right," she said angrily. "Now that you've found him, I suppose you'll take him in and make yourself a hero."

Dutch swore. "You'd better not try, Wallace."

"I'm right beside him, Dutch," Marcia said quickly.

Neil frowned. "What was that for?"

Dutch laughed bitterly. "She means for me not to shoot, Wallace. She knows I'd be afraid of hitting her too." There was the sound of a gun being laid on the floor. "All right. If she thinks that much of you, I'll go along with it."

"I didn't do it for him," Marcia protested. "I just don't want to arouse the whole country."

"Thanks," Neil said dryly. He struck a match and saw Dutch lying on some straw across the loft. "I didn't come here to take you back, Dutch. I just wanted to find out a few things about last night."

"Like what?"

"Like where your horse is, and what became of your man Suggs."

Dutch groaned. "I wish I knew. Suggs must've stolen the horse, I reckon. At least they disappeared at the same time." He hesitated, then added grimly, "I suppose you think I'm lying."

"No," Neil said, "I don't." He moved over by the trapdoor. "One thing's sure, you can't stay here much longer. I'm not the only one who might come looking for you."

"Oh Neil!" Marcia's hand found his arm. "We can't let them find him. Dutch never hurt anybody. If they just stay away until night, I'll get him out of here."

He felt for her hand, and this time she didn't draw away. "I'll head 'em off if I can," he said. "And Marcia—"

"What?"

"Nothing."

Neil turned toward the ladder, remembering how hopeless it was, with her father and his in opposite camps, and Delight Dubois probably already on her way to visit him. He descended the ladder and crossed to where his horse was tied. A minute later he was headed out toward Box-S, meaning to try to pick up the trail of the dynamiter.

Only a mile or so from Dutch's he ran into his father and a group of Warbird rider, including Bridger and Pollack. They reined up and watched him suspiciously. It was King who spoke.

"What've you been up to?"

Neil tried to appear unconcerned. "I've been over at Shortinghuis's place. I got to wondering why we didn't find his horse in the barn last night."

"And?"

Neil shrugged. "I wasted my time. If it did come back, we blotted out the prints with our own."

Bridger looked at him narrowly. "I reckon there's no reason we can't look for ourselves."

Neil grinned. "Help yourself. It's a free country."

King held up his hand. "Just a minute. Did you find anything else?"

Neil shook his head. "Nothing to indicate that Dutch had anything to do with blowing up the dam."

Bridger made an impatient gesture. "That's another thing I'll decide with my own eyes." He lifted his reins.

"Hold it, Bridger," King said. "Are you accusing a Wallace of lying?"

Bridger grinned crookedly. "Hell, boss, you know better than that." In spite of the grin, his eyes were hard. "It's just that we have to start somewhere."

Neil had begun to roll a cigaret. He said quietly, "If I were you, I'd try to follow those tracks where they leave the dam. It strikes me that, if Dutch had been riding the horse, he would've kept it close at hand in case he had to make a run for it. Since nobody heard him ride out, it seems that the horse might not have been ridden to Dutch's at all."

King nodded. "You have a point there." He turned toward the foreman. "Send someone to follow those tracks. The rest of the men can go back to work rebuilding the dam. That damned blast put us a week behind schedule, and I'm getting tired of waiting." He glanced at Neil. "You come with me. There's plenty of work to be done around Warbird."

Relieved, Neil followed King up the trail toward Warbird.

FOR the next several days, Neil was kept busy with the innumerable jobs connected with a big ranch. During this time Corky, who had insisted on being moved to the bunkhouse, recovered to the point where he was able to hobble about with the aid of a stick.

Most of the men were working on the ditch or at rebuilding the dam, and King was usually away from the house, inspecting the progress they were making. Almost before Neil realized it, it was time for Delight to arrive. The idea gave Neil little pleasure, since he had decided long since that it had been a foolish thing to invite her in the first place.

Before Delight was off the depot platform, word of her arrival would have penetrated to the farthest corner of the town, and in a mat-

ter of hours it would be known by every rancher in the area. It mattered because of Marcia. By now Neil had come to realize that no other girl would ever mean as much to him as his miraculously transformed childhood playmate.

Nevertheless, he was on the platform when Delight stepped down from the car. She looked as fresh as if she were only starting a three-day trip, instead of ending one, and was flanked by two grinning punchers who insisted on carrying her grips.

Neil crossed the cinders and reached up to take her hand. As he did, her foot seemed to catch on the bottom step, and she fell against him, throwing her arm around his neck to keep from falling.

There were several loungers on the platform, and Neil knew they were all watching. He was embarrassed for himself, but more so for Delight, who blushed. Trying to appear unconcerned, he grinned at her as he took her arm and led her to the buckboard.

He helped her in, then turned and saw that Hub Talbert was watching him thoughtfully, his face wrinkled in concentration. As Neil turned, the little man lowered his eyes and scurried away. Neil tossed Delight's grips in the back of the buckboard and climbed onto the seat.

Delight smiled at him obliquely. "I'm sorry, Neil. I didn't mean to put on such a performance."

He grinned. "Don't worry about it. They're all jealous. It isn't every day a girl as pretty as you comes to Kingvale."

She squeezed his arm and moved a little closer. "Flatterer," she said. "But I like it." She was wearing some kind of perfume that reminded Neil of the party in St. Louis, and his pulse began to beat a little faster.

They crossed the hogback and came down into Warbird, and King Wallace crossed the porch to meet them, his face set in serious lines. Neil stepped down and helped Delight out of the buckboard.

"This is Delight DuBois, King. Delight, this is my father."

King looked at Delight and his expression changed, almost as though he were startled. Then he smiled and held out his hand. "Welcome to Warbird, Miss DuBois." He looked up at Neil. "Show her her room, boy. I'll take care of the team."

Neil nodded, and turned toward Delight. For a moment she kept her eyes on his father. She, too, had a strange expression. Then she took Neil's arm and went up onto the porch.

"Your father, Neil," she said soberly, "scares me a little. He seems to look right through me."

Neil laughed. "You have to get used to him, Delight. He'll be crazy about you."

But Neil too, was a little worried. He tried to shrug it off, but the feeling persisted, even though everything seemed to go smoothly in the days that followed.

Well, almost everything. Delight went out of her way to be friendly with Francesca. and the house seemed to come alive again. With Bridger spending most of his time at the dam, and Ace Pollock still trying to catch up with the dynamiter, there was little reason for trouble.

Only one thing bothered Neil, other than the always present problem about the little ranchers. The one thing was King's peculiar attitude toward Delight and Neil. After urging Neil to invite her, it seemed strange that King should go to such lengths to keep them apart.

It was almost as though he saw some trait in Delight's character that had him worried. He kept Neil busy at jobs which kept him away from the ranch. He even put Neil on night guard at the dam—a precaution that had been adopted after the dynamiting.

Friday night, when Neil rode in with the crew from the dam, Ace Pollock was sitting on the bunkhouse doorstep, a knowing grin on his face. Bridger rode up and dismounted beside him.

"I see you're back, Ace. You sure took your time."

Ace shrugged. "He was always one jump ahead of me." Then he grinned. "I caught him, though, and it was Suggs, like we thought. Dutch paid him a hundred dollars to wreck the dam, and told him to keep on riding afterward."

Bridger grinned. "The old man'll be glad to hear that. Now we can go after Dutch." He handed his reins to one of the punchers and started toward the house.

"Just a minute." Neil stepped out of the saddle and faced Pollock. "Did you bring Suggs back?"

Pollock frowned. "Hell no. He went for his gun, and I killed him."

"*After* he told you about the deal, I suppose."

Ace flushed. "Damn it, Wallace, are you insinuating that I'm lying?"

"No." Neil shook his head. "I'm telling you."

Ace got to his feet, and Neil braced himself. He hadn't meant to force Pollock's hand, but he was sure Ace was lying.

"Hold it, you two!" Bridger stepped between them. "We're not going to fight among ourselves."

Neil turned toward the house and saw his father on the porch. Had Bridger seen King before he stopped the fight? There was no way of finding out. Neil gathered up his reins and took his horse to the barn. When he returned to the house his father was still on the porch.

"What happened out there?"

"Nothing." Neil reached for the door. "Pollock says he caught up with the dynamiter, but I think he's lying."

He entered the house and started up the stairs, but Francesca called from the dining room, "The table's all set for dinner. We'll wait for you."

Still angry over the trouble with Pollock, Neil was about to refuse. Then he saw the pleading in Francesca's eyes and forced a grin. "All right. Just let me clean up a little."

WHEN he came down to the dining room Delight looked up at him a little crossly. "You're late," she said. "It seems as if—" She broke off and smiled guiltily. "I guess I'm just getting bored. You're gone so much of the time, and I'm used to having lots of people around. I'm sorry."

She looked so penitent that Neil felt a little guilty himself. On impulse he said, "There's a dance in town tomorrow night. Maybe you'd like to go."

Delight clapped her hands excitedly. "I'd love it!"

Neil looked at his father, expecting some opposition, but King nodded. "Sounds like a good idea. We'll show people we go where we please."

Already Neil was sorry he had made the suggestion. He wasn't trying to prove anything. And Marcia would be at the dance. But it was all set now. Already Delight was talking excitedly to Francesca about what she would wear.

That their conversation was productive became evident the next night when Delight came down the stairway in her party finery. With Francesca's help she had remodelled one of the dresses she had brought from St. Louis, and the result was startling.

The dress focused attention on her soft white shoulders and voluptuous figure. Looking at her, and admitting his own reaction, Neil reflected wryly that he might be in for a little trouble when he ushered her into the schoolhouse.

The local women would probably consider her a brazen hussy, and the men—Neil shrugged. Well, it wouldn't be the first time he had gone outside to settle an argument which had started in the dancehall.

As it turned out, however, Delight appeared to captivate everyone at the dance, and Neil was ignored, apparently by tacit agreement. When they entered the hall, a stranger behind a makeshift counter asked Neil for his gun. Neil handed it over.

The man said, "Your name, stranger?"

"Wallace," Neil said.

The man looked surprised. "Not—"

He left the question unfinished, and turned away quickly to hang Neil's gunbelt on a nail and scribble his name above it with chalk. Neil turned away and saw that Delight was already talking with a couple of flustered ranch girls, her beauty more noticeable by contrast with their plainess.

She was fairly bubbling with excitement, and Neil could see that the girls couldn't help being flattered by her attention, even though they must have envied her poise and good looks. He glanced across the room and saw Hub Talbert talking with another rancher. Both of them regarded him sourly.

The three-piece orchestra began to tune up, and Delight came over to take his arm. "I

presume you're going to ask me for a dance, aren't you?" she said jokingly.

Neil grinned. "I'd like to see anybody stop me."

The music started then, and Neil circled her waist with his arm and whirled her onto the floor. For a moment it seemed that they were going to have the floor to themselves; the local people were eyeing them resentfully. Then the girls Delight had talked to started to dance with their partners, and the tension was relieved.

Obviously Delight had anticipated this situation and had taken steps to correct it. It was a new line of thought. But with Delight's seductive perfume in his nostrils, Neil didn't let it worry him.

The dance ended, and Delight excused herself to join most of the other girls in a little anteroom. When she came out, one of her new acqauintances had her in tow and introduced her to a red-faced puncher. Delight smiled at the man.

When the music started again he put his arm around her gingerly, getting even redder when his hand found nothing but bare skin. They passed Neil, and Delight raised her eyebrows expressively, as though to let him know that it was something she hadn't been able to avoid. Neil grinned, telling himself that he was a fool for feeling a little twinge of jealously.

Apparently there were a number of things Delight couldn't avoid, for she was claimed by another man for the next dance, and then by still another. Meanwhile, Neil had made a half-hearted attempt to find another partner, but it was clear that none of the girls was going to accept his invitation.

Finally, after several dances, Delight crossed the room and looked up at him appealingly.

"You don't mind, do you, Neil? They all keep after me so much."

Neil forced a grin. "Go ahead," he said. "They've never met a girl like you. I wouldn't spoil their pleasure."

They danced the next one together, and when it was over, Neil saw that Marcia had arrived, accompanied by a red-headed cowboy. Marcia was looking at Delight thoughtfully, a little frown on her face. When she saw Neil watching her, she looked away quickly.

Delight glanced up at Neil. "Who is that pretty girl in the blue dress?"

There was nothing wrong with her words, but Neil resented her patronizing air. He shrugged. "Some local girl, I suppose."

It was silly to get riled about it. Women were famous for saying catty things about other members of their sex, or saying nice things in a catty tone. He supposed Marcia might use the same inflection when speaking about Delight. Or would she? It seemed unlikely, somehow.

The music started again, and Delight was off in another man's arms. Neil worked his way to the door and went out onto the porch, pretty much disgusted with things in general. The marshal was leaning against the front of the building, puffing moodily on a cigar. He looked up and nodded.

"Nice night, Wallace."

Neil grinned. "Sure is," he said. "Just wonderful."

The marshal laughed softly. "Don't let it throw you, Wallace. We all have our troubles."

Something in his voice made Neil look up quickly. "What's your trouble, Marshal?"

The marshal shook his head irritably. "*Me*—that's my trouble." He threw his cigar on the ground and turned away. "You can forget I said it, Wallace. I'm just feeling mean tonight."

Neil watched him disappear into the darkness, and remembered the scene in front of the cafe a few days earlier. He felt a little sorry for Mulholland. It was a bad thing when a man sold his self-respect for someone else's money. He thought about his own situation then and made an angry gesture.

That was entirely different, he told himself. King Wallace was his father, and Warbird rightly should be his. But he couldn't throw off the dark mood, and he started back to the dance feeling worse than when he had come out.

A man met him in the doorway, the red-headed puncher who had come with Marcia. Neil tensed, expecting trouble, but the man said flatly, "Marcia says I should tell you to ask her for a dance."

"Thanks." Puzzled, Neil watched the man

turn and go back into the hall. It might be a trick, but he had to find out. He entered the hall and saw Marcia talking to some other girls near the doorway. Coming to her side, he said stiffly, "May I have the next dance, Miss Turner?"

She smiled and drew away from the others. "Of course, Neil." She shook her head. "Don't look so grim; they'll think we're fighting."

The music started up, and Neil put his arm around her, her firm young body fitting smoothly against his. He looked down at her soft clean hair and cursed himself for being a fool. When did a man have to find things out when it was too late?

MARCIA looked up at him soberly. "I had to see you, Neil. I wanted to apologize for what I said the other night. I'm sorry I doubted you."

Neil's spirits soared. "Don't apologize, Marcia. If anyone's to blame, it's me."

She smiled. "Let's not go overboard about this, Neil." She looked around at the other dancers, then added softly, "I got Dutch away all right, thanks to you."

"That's good." Neil grinned at her. "Now maybe we can be friends again."

Her smile faded. She seemed about to say something, then changed her mind. "Your friend from St. Louis is beautiful, Neil."

Neil nodded, but his moment of pleasure was gone. The dance ended then, and Marcia was claimed by the red-head. Neil turned and saw Delight beckoning to him. He pushed his way to her side.

"This is the last dance, Neil. I suppose we'll have it together?" There was a speculative look in her eyes.

He nodded, and led her onto the floor. Afterward, when she had put on her coat, they went out on the porch.

Neil went to where he had left the buggy, but it was gone. He puzzled over it for a minute, then shook his head resignedly. If hiding the buggy was all these people intended to do against him, it wasn't worth getting sore about. He'd just get a rig from the livery. He explained to Delight, and asked her to wait. The marshal had returned, so it seemed safe enough.

It wasn't so easy to get another buggy after all, and Neil realized that the liveryman had been warned not to help. Neil had dealt with tough characters before, however, and the liveryman soon remembered a vehicle he had out in the back. Neil climbed in and drove to the schoolhouse.

Marshal Mulholland was alone on the porch. "She's gone," he said. "Right after you left, Flake Bridger drove up in your buggy. He said he found it behind the mercantile, and figured it was a trick of some kind. Your lady friend said to tell you she was tired, so she went back with Bridger."

Neil's anger mounted, but he kept his voice low. "Then I'll find Bridger's horse and ride it back to Warbird." He wheeled the livery rig around and returned it to the stable. Afterward, he located Bridger's Warbird-branded animal in front of Diamond's saloon, and took off for the ranch.

When he got there Bridger was just unharnessing the team. He looked at Neil and grinned slyly. "Sorry about this, kid," he said. "She wanted to come home, so I couldn't very well do anything else."

Neil nodded. "Forget it." He didn't want trouble now—not with King's right-hand man.

Bridger apparently took his acquiescence as timidity. "Now that's real nice of you," he said. He grinned. "After all, it's not every day a man gets to take a pretty girl like her buggy riding." He guffawed. "Buggy riding—that's good!"

Neil hit him then, all his pent-up fury erupting suddenly into violence. The foreman went over backward, but turned a complete somersault and came up on his feet, agile as a cat. "So you want it that way," he said thinly. "All right, it's something I've been waiting for." He charged, his chin lowered inside the crook of his left arm.

Neil swung a savage left, but it glanced off the foreman's shoulder. At the same time, lightning exploded on Neil's jaw, sending him spinning. He caromed off the side of a stall and fell on his back. As he shook his head, Bridger pounced toward him, his bootheels aimed at Neil's stomach.

Neil whirled out of the way by inches and grabbed at Bridger's ankle, jerking Bridg-

er off balance. The foreman skidded along the rough floor on the side of his face. By this time horses were snorting and kicking in their stalls.

"Come on," Neil said, getting to his feet. "Let's try that again." He was confident now, and his reluctance vanished. "You've been asking for this, Bridger. Let's see how big a man you really are."

Bridger growled deep in his throat and waded in. They stood toe to toe, their fists pounding each other soggily. Neil's head was heavy, and blood was running down his chin, but he could see that Bridge was in even worse shape. This gave Neil added strength, and he buried his fist in Bridger's stomach. The foreman sagged to his knees.

"Break it up, you crazy fools!"

Neil turned wearily and saw his father watching from the doorway. King's face was red with anger, but there was a strange light in his eyes as he looked from Neil to the man on the floor—a sort of satisfied look.

Then he said sharply, "Get in the house, boy. There's no sense in fighting among ourselves this way."

Neil staggered past him toward the house, wiping blood from his face. Behind him, he heard Bridges cursing softly. Dog tired after the fight, Neil fell asleep as soon as he hit the bed.

When he awoke, it was to hear King talking angrily at the foot of the stairs. Neil tried to ignore it, but King's voice was insistent, and Neil found himself listening.

"Damn it, woman," King said, "I thought we had this straightened out a long time ago."

"But that's all changed, King." Francesca sounded a little wild, and Neil frowned in surprise. "You're *free* now, and there's no reason why you can't marry me. It's what you've always said you wanted."

KING laughed harshly. "Don't pretend you really *believed* that stuff. I liked you all right, but you knew damned well I had no idea of marriage. You just pretended to think so, on account of that damned conscience of yours."

He cursed. "Wouldn't those fellers love it, though, if I were to marry a servant! They'd have something new to laugh about behind my back."

He lowered his voice. "You have no kick coming Francesca. I've given you everything you needed. Now forget about it and bring me my breakfast. Damn it, where the hell is everybody, anyway? If they're going to eat my grub, the least they can do is get down to their meals in time. Where's Delight?"

Francesca's soft answer was inaudible.

King said hotly, "If you're going to make a fuss about it, at least keep out of sight!"

There was silence for a few moments. Then Neil heard Francesca's light footsteps on the stairs. She passed his room, and her own door, at the back of the hall, closed softly. A little later a chair scraped down below, and King stomped up the steps. A door rattled as a heavy fist pounded on it.

King said loudly, "Come alive in there. It's breakfast time."

Neil rolled out of bed and opened his door a crack. Across the big hall at the head of the stairs, King was staring beligerently at Delight's closed door. As the seconds passed without any results from his summons, King seemed to swell with anger.

Finally his hand shot out and twisted the doorknob. The door swung open. Neil looked past his father and saw a shapeless bundle of blankets on Delight's bed. The bundle moved, and Delight looked up sleepily.

"Go away," she said. "I don't want any breakfast."

"Well I don't want to eat alone!" King reached out and yanked the covers loose. Delight was wearing only a wisp of a nightgown, and it clung to every curve of her body. King backed off a step, and Neil heard his quick intake of breath. "You *are* a woman!"

Delight rolled out of bed and stared at King boldly. "All right. Now that you know what a woman looks like, get out!"

King reached out and grabbed her by one shoulder. "Don't give me orders in my own house, woman. What I want, I take."

Neil started to open the door, then turned and grabbed his pants off the chair. King had to be stopped, but there was no sense rushing out there in his underwear. He jerked his belt tight and opened the door, only to stop

on the threshold. Across the hall, Delight and King were in a passionate embrace.

As Neil froze, he heard Delight say calmly, "Don't you think we ought to close the door?"

Neil slumped on the edge of the bed, his thoughts in a turmoil. Gradually, as the shock passed, things began to fall into place. Now that he knew what kind of a woman Delight was, he could understand her letter. It wasn't Neil she was interested in, it was Warbird. Given the opportunity to transfer her attentions to King, she had lost no time making the switch. Why take a chance on a longshot when she could have a sure thing?

But what about King. Had this ardent scene in the bedroom been an impulsive response to Delight's physical charms? Neil shook his head grimly. Hardly. King had the same desires as other men, but there was a purpose behind everything he did, and no one, not even Delight, could throw him off balance in an unguarded moment.

Even as a boy, Neil had recognized this trait of his father's and had secretly gloried in it, although loyalty to his mother had kept him from saying so. But in those days, King's passion had been merely to become the richest man in the territory. Now—

Neil stared at the floor in concentration, reviewing the things that had happened since his return to Warbird—King's threats against the little ranchers, the way he had smashed Diamond's mirror, the burning of Dutch's house. These things, too, had a purpose, only now the purpose was evil—a deliberate attempt to goad the whole countryside to the point where King would be able to get revenge for all his real or fancied injuries.

Neil got to his feet, his lips twisted into a sour grimace. Maybe he ought to thank Delight for opening his eyes. At any rate, he knew now where he stood—knew that he was part of the scheme.

King didn't give a damn for his son. He just wanted to prove to the world that he could run Neil like he ran everybody else. He had used Delight to trick Neil into staying at Warbird, and Neil, thinking about the chance of inheriting the ranch, had fallen for it.

Now that he saw it clearly, Neil felt strangely relieved. What had happened across the hall had cancelled his obligation to both Delight and his father. As for Warbird, to hell with it! There were other things more important than wealth—things like self-respect, and being able to talk freely wih Marcia.

A door opened at the back of the hall, and he heard Francesca pass his room and go down the stairs. Had she seen King and Delight in the bedroom? He shook his head glumly and finished dressing, then gathered up his stuff and went downstairs.

Since it was Sunday, nobody was working except the guards at the dam. Neil went to the barn and saddled a horse, tying his bedroll behind the cantle. He rode out and headed for town, meaning to go immediately to Will Turner and talk to Marcia. What he did afterward would depend on that conversation.

He was almost at Turner's place when he heard hoofbeats behind him and pulled off into the brush, not wanting to talk with anyone until he knew what he was going to do. He stepped out of the saddle and put hand on his horse's muzzle lest it betray his presence. After a moment three horsemen came along the road—Hub Talbert and two other men. Talbert was talking.

"I tell you there's no other way," he said. "As long as King Wallace has control of that land, we'll never know when he's going to cut off the water."

One of the other men scratched his chin reflectively. "I don't know, Hub. According to Will Turner, that dam isn't even on Warbird land. He says it's on Box-S."

"Damn it, Travis, what difference does that make? Wallace sold Stubblefield the land just so we wouldn't figure on his pulling a trick like this. He has enough of Stubblefield's notes to kick him off any time he has a notion to do it."

THEY passed out of hearing then, but Neil stayed where he was for some time. Probably Talbert was right, and King had planned on something like this when he let Stubby take over what was now Box-S. With a little man like themselves owning the headwaters of the creek, the ranchers naturally would feel confident in building up their spreads. And as Talbert had said, King could

take it back whenever he wanted to.

Neil shook his head. If Talbert and the others meant to seize the dam, Stubby should be warned. But Stubby would be sure to send word to Warbird, and King would jump at the chance to set up an ambush and get revenge on all the men he hated. He could do it then without even breaking the law, for Will Turner and the others would be trespassers.

When the riders were out of sight, Neil got back into his saddle and followed cautiously, keeping to the brush as much as possible. He came to Will Turner's cut-off and saw the three sets of tracks turning in. Apparently there was going to be a meeting of some sort. He dismounted and let his horse back from the road, then crept through the brush until he could look down on Broken Bow.

Half a dozen horses were tied at Turner's hitchrail, but nobody was in sight. Neil settled down for a long wait. After a bit, Marcia came out of the house and pumped some water at the well. The gentle wind blew her soft hair about her face and whipped the thin dress around her ankles.

Neil wanted to call out, to let her know right then how he felt. But he was an enemy. Marcia might believe him, but the others wouldn't—especially Talbert, who seemed suspicious of everybody. Marcia went back in, and after a while the men came out into the yard, some of them a little red in the face.

Talbert was grinning triumphantly. "All right, then," he said. "It's settled that we'll do it tonight."

"Not so loud, Hub," Turner said quietly. "We're counting on surprising 'em."

"Hell, nobody can hear us," Talbert said. "You're just too jumpy." He turned to the others. "Eight o'clock, then, up at the forks."

Most of them left, but one man remained, and it was apparent that he meant to stay a while. Knowing that he had no chance of going down now, Neil backed off and got his horse. It occurred to him that if he intended to stay around here any length of time he'd need a horse of his own. It was a cinch he didn't want to ride one of King's any more. With this in mind, he turned toward town.

Marshal Mulholland was leaning against one of the posts that held up the hotel's wooden awning. He looked at Neil and nodded. "I see your razor slipped," he said dryly.

Neil touched his scarred face. "I always did have trouble shaving." He reached for his tobacco. "I don't suppose you'd know of a good horse I could buy at a sensible price."

The marshal pointed. "You might try the livery. He generally has one or two."

Neil grinned. "I have an idea I wouldn't get a very good deal there, after last night."

"Maybe not." The marshal pushed away from the post. "I've got one you can use, if it'll help you out." He frowned. "What's the matter with the one you have?"

"Not a thing," Neil said. "Only I'm leaving Warbird, and I don't hanker to be strung up as a horsethief."

"Leaving Warbird?" the marshal said. "For good?"

"For good," Neil said. He looked at the marshal thoughtfully. "Why don't you do the same?"

Mulholland stared at the ground for a minute. When he looked up, it seemed for a second that he had come to a decision about something. But he quickly turned glum again.

"Not me, boy. When you've jumped through a hoop as long as I have, you know better than to stop."

"It's up to you," Neil said. "Anyway, I'll borrow that horse, if the offer's still open."

"Come along." The marshal led him around behind the hotel to a lean-to stable and pointed to a bay mare. "She's not the fastest in the world, but she'll stay with you."

"I wouldn't ask for more." Neil transferred his saddle and bridle to the mare, and put a loop around the Warbird animal's neck. "If anything happens to your horse I'll give you whatever she's worth." He thought a minute. "Or you can take it out of my pocket, in case I'm not able to pay you myself."

The marshal frowned. "Sounds as if you're looking for trouble."

"Me?" Neil grinned. "I've had enough trouble, without looking for it." He stared at the marshal a long moment, wishing he dared tell him about the impending raid on Box-S, but deciding against it. "Well, I have to take

this horse back." He stepped into the saddle and headed west.

Back at Warbird, Neil found some signs of life. Corky was sitting on a nailkeg beside the bunkhouse. As Neil stopped to speak to him, King Wallace came out on the porch and hollered.

"I want to see you, boy. Come over to my office."

Neil didn't answer, and Corky grinned. "What's the matter, Neil—are you still sore about last night?" His grin faded. "I heard about the fight. The way Bridger's telling it, he beat hell out of you." He squinted at Neil. "From your looks, I'd say he had it backward."

Neil wasn't paying much attention; his thoughts were on the coming interview with his father. He got down and handed Corky the lead rope. "Put this horse in the barn for me, will you, Corky?"

Corky nodded. "Sure, Neil."

King was waiting impatiently in his office when Neil got there. "Damn it, boy, where've you been? We're about ready to close the damn, and you were nowhere to be found. In the morning, I want you to be—"

"In the morning I won't be here," Neil said.

King roared. "What's that? What fool notion are you talking about now?"

"I'm leaving Warbird."

KING grabbed Neil's arm. "You fool! You don't know what you're saying." His eyes hardened. "If you're running out on me because that little Turner tramp rolled her eyes at you, I'll—"

Neil controlled himself with an effort. "Maybe I *am* a fool," he said. "At any rate I was fool enough to think that getting Warbird was all I wanted. But I've come to my senses in time, and it wasn't because anyone rolled her eyes at me." He shook King's hand loose from his arm. "And speaking of tramps, how do you figure to get rid of Delight, now that she's got you hooked?"

King's face turned purple. "Why you damned insolent pup!" His right fist shot out and caught Neil on the cheek. "So that's what touched you off. I might've known you were too much like your mother." He sucked in his breath noisily. "By heaven, you just gave away a ranch. Before this time tomorrow, I'll get the lawyer to draw up a new will. You won't get one square inch of Warbird."

"You can keep the place," Neil said. "It'll probably kill you someday."

He left the office, anxious to get out into the open air. Delight was standing at the foot of the stairs, looking at him wide-eyed.

"Neil," she said, "what are you up to?"

Neil studied her coldly. "Don't worry about me," he said. "You have someone else to keep an eye on now. He's in the office." He started away, then turned to add ironically, "This time, don't forget to close the door."

Her shrill laughter caught up with him as he went down the porch steps.

Corky hobbled over from the barn as Neil was stepping into his saddle. "You riding out, boy?"

"For good. I should've listened to your advice in the first place, but I was too smart."

"Aren't we all?" Corky stuck out his hand. "You had me worried, Neil. Good luck, wherever you're going."

"Thanks." Neil glanced toward the house and frowned. "Tell Francesca I'll get in touch with her. She isn't going to be happy on Warbird after today."

"Sure."

Corky raised a hand in farewell, as Neil rode out. At the top of the hogback he turned to look back, and shook his head grimly. Only a few days before, Warbird had seemed the most important thing in the world. He'd sure been one hell of a fool.

He turned his back and headed down the slope. There were still some things to settle before he was done with this. For one thing, what about the raid Will Turner and his friends were planning for tonight? He couldn't just ride over to Turner's house and announce that he had switched sides and was now fighting Warbird.

They would have too many reasons for suspecting a trick, after the way he had been acting. For that matter, even if they accepted him, it wouldn't solve anything. One more gun wouldn't make much difference in such a one-sided battle.

Someone was coming out the main road, his horse raising a cloud of dust. Neil pulled off into the brush, thinking the rider would go on past without turning in toward Warbird. It struck him just then that his only chance to prevent the raid would be to wait until dark, then ride out where he could see the little ranchers as they approached the dam, and make enough of a racket to convince them that their surprise attack was anticipated. Surely they'd have sense enough then to abandon the idea.

The hoofbeats were close now, and Neil dismounted and held his horse's head, expecting the rider to continue out the main road. Instead, the hoofbeats slowed as the horse started up the slope. Neil parted the brush and saw that it was Hub Talbert in the saddle. He frowned. What was Talbert doing on the Warbird road, and why did he look so uneasy?

Curious, Neil waited until Talbert was out of sight, then followed. At the top of the hill he tied his horse and went forward cautiously on foot. He was in time to see Talbert ride into the ranchyard.

Bridger was in the yard now, along with Corky and a man Neil couldn't identify from this distance. It was too far to hear voices, but Neil saw Bridger motion to the unidentified puncher, who crossed the yard and went into the house. In a few seconds he returned, King Wallace beside him.

King went over to where Talbert's horse was standing, and looked up at the little man. After a moment, he nodded and glanced around at Bridger. He started back toward the house then, but turned as though Talbert had spoken. He reached in his pocket for a moneybag, took something out of it, and handed it to Talbert, then gestured irritably toward the road.

Talbert started to ride out, but he had only gone a few yards when he suddenly rose up in the stirrups and pitched out of the saddle. The sound of a gunshot reached Neil then, and he stared in amazement at his father, who was holding a sixgun.

King watched Talbert for a moment, then holstered his gun and went back to the house. As soon as he was out of sight, Bridger crossed over to where Talbert lay, rolled him on his back ,and took something out of his pocket.

Neil cursed fervently. Accustomed as he was to violence, he had never seen anything as raw as this. He edged back from the ridge and got into the saddle. One thing was pretty clear—Warbird knew about the raid now.

Probably Talbert had been working secretly with King all the time. Now that he had talked the other men into walking into an ambush, his usefulness was ended. No doubt King had killed him to prevent a doublecross.

It was doubly important now to stop Will Turner's men from committing suicide, and stopping them at the dam wouldn't do any good if King and the Warbird crew were waiting for them. Talbert's murder was evidence enough that King had gone completely mad.

NEIL reached the main road and turned in at Broken Bow. Will Turner was sitting on the doorstep working on a saddle. He saw Neil and got to his feet, reaching inside the doorway for a rifle.

"You won't need that," Neil said bitterly. "I just came to warn you. Hub Talbert's sold you out. King knows about your plan to grab the dam."

"The devil!" Turner lowered the gun and came out to where Neil was sitting. "What're you telling *me* for, Neil?"

"I'm trying to keep you from getting killed. You have sense enough to see what you're up against. If you pull a trick like this, you'll be playing right into King's hand."

Turner nodded gloomily. "That's what I've been telling 'em, Neil." He spread his hands. "But we can't just sit here and do nothing. Your father will squeeze us out."

"No," Neil agreed, "you can't. But there must be some way of doing it without breaking the law yourself. I have a hazy idea, but it's a long shot." He fixed Turner with a steady look. "Do you figure you can hold your men off for another twenty-four hours?"

"I might." Turner laid a hand on Neil's knee. "What's you going to try, boy?"

"Wait and see if it works." Neil glanced toward the house. "Is Marcia around?"

"She's not here," Turner said. He frowned. "She has Dutch Shortinghuis hidden out some-

place, and she's taking him some food."

Neil's spirits lifted. Will Turner trusted him a little, or he wouldn't have said that much. He lifted his hand and turned toward the road.

Half an hour later he rode into Kingvale, which lay hot and still on this Sunday afternoon. It struck him that he was hungry, and he drew up in front of the safe, only to find it closed. .Marshal Mulholland hailed him from the porch of the hotel next door.

"If you're looking for grub, they'll fix you up in here."

"Thanks." Neil tied his horse and went up on the hotel porch, where the marshal was tilted back in a decrepit chair. "There's something else I'm looking for, Marshal. Is there a lawyer in town?"

Mulholland nodded. "Fred Palmer. But he's gone for the day. If you want to see him, you'll have to come back in the morning." He pointed across the street. "There's his office, next to the saloon." He let his chair settle to the floor. "Why? What d'you want a lawyer for?"

"A private matter," Neil said. He regarded the marshal thoughtfully. "That other thing we were talking about—have you thought any more about it?"

Mulholland said bleakly, "Sure. I've been thinking about it for years, but that's as far as it'll get."

."I wonder."

Neil left him then, and entered the hotel. While he was eating, he decided it might be a good idea to take a room and get a little rest, inasmuch as he had to wait until morning to see the lawyer. His fight with Bridger hadn't left him untouched, and he'd probably need to be in good shape if he hoped to accomplish anything.

He stabled his horse and returned to the hotel, where the clerk assigned him a little room on the second floor. Fifteen minutes later he was dead asleep.

It was dawn when he awoke. He shaved gingerly, then went over to the cafe. When he finished eating it was almost eight. He crossed to the lawyer's office. A thin-faced young man greeted him pleasantly.

"Mr. Palmer?" Neil asked.

The lawyer nodded. "And you're Neil Wallace. I've heard about you." He grinned. "You've cut quite a swath around here." His grin faded. "What can I do for you?"

Neil liked the man instinctively. "I'm not quite sure," he said, "but I'm willing to pay to find out." He pulled up a chair and sat down. "I suppose you know about the ditch that King Wallace has been digging, and the dam he's built."

The lawyer frowned. "Your father, you mean."

Neil nodded. "He *was* my father, let's say."

Palmer lifted his eyebrows. "So that's the way it is. Anyway, to answer your question, I know what's going on. In fact I've been approached on the matter before."

"By Will Turner?"

The lawyer smiled. "That's something I'm not free to reveal."

"Sure." Neil nodded. Probably it *was* Will Turner who had sought legal advice. "What I want to know is this. Since the dam is actually on Stubblefield's property, could he force Warbird to get off the land?"

Palmer laughed. "You're asking me something I can't answer, Wallace. Legally, King could be evicted like any other trespasser. But practically, since he presumably could foreclose on Box-S if he wanted to, an eviction order wouldn't accomplish anything."

"But suppose Stubblefield served the papers on him, and he refused to get off. Would that put him outside the law?"

The lawyer frowned. "Certainly it would." He studied Neil. "What're you driving at?"

Neil grinned. "I'm not sure I know myself. Anyway, you draw up the papers, and I'll pay you for your trouble."

Palmer shrugged. "That's what I'm here for." He took some ruled paper out of his desk and was busy for a few minutes, then straightened up. "Here it is, Wallace. But there are a few more things you'll have to do. You've got to get Stubblefield to sign it, somebody to serve it, and—" he smiled grimly—"someone to enforce it."

Neil got up and reached in his pocket. "I reckon that's my problem. How much?"

Palmer waved him away. "If you're willing to buck those odds, I'll risk ten minutes' time on it."

"Thanks."

Neil left the office and angled across toward Mulholland's hole-in-the-wall office. The marshal was behind his desk, thumbing through a bunch of reward dodgers. He glanced up unhappily.

"Now what, Wallace?"

Neil held out the paper. "I'd like to get you to serve this paper on King Wallace. If you won't, I want you to appoint me as a deputy."

"Let's see it." The marshal read the paper and looked up quickly. "I reckon you know it'll be like shooting a grizzy with a slingshot."

"That's a chance I'll have to take."

MULHOLLAND got up and walked over to look blankly at a weathered reward notice on the opposite wall. Then he turned and regarded Neil wryly. "See this feller, Wallace? I dragged him out of a cave once, with him shooting at me all the time I was moving in. I used to be quite a man, I guess." He crossed the room angrily and grabbed his hat. "Come on. Let's get it over with."

Neil sensed that this was-no time for talk. They left the office and rode out of town. Where the road joined the creek, Mulholland reined up and pointed. "I see that your father couldn't wait. He's shut off the water."

Neil looked at the creek and saw that it had dwindled to a trickle. "Then we'll have to hurry. Turner's bunch won't hold back when they find out." He lifted his horse into a trot, and the marshal fell in behind.

They went directly to Box-S, where they found Stubby in the yard, a rifle in his hand. "I figured you might be some of the ranchers," Stubby said uneasily. "They're going to raise hell when they find out about this." He gestured toward the house. "Come in. There's coffee on the stove."

They dismounted and entered the kitchen, where Stubby's only hired hand was sitting with a carbine in his lap. Neil greeted him, then turned to the rancher.

"How about it, Stubby—do you like what's happening to your friends?"

Stubblefield rubbed his jaw. "Of course I don't Neil, but what the hell—your father has me over a barrel."

Neil spread out the paper. "If you really don't like it, Stubby, then sign this paper."

Stubby frowned. "What's it about?"

Neil told him.

"But he won't get off this land. You know King Wallace. And if he did, he'd be back in a day or so, and I'd be out of a ranch."

Neil laid a hand on his shoulder. "Give me a chance, Stubby. If you turn me down now, you'll always hate yourself."

Stubby looked uncertainly at the marshal, whose face was a mask. He turned back toward Neil. "All right, damn it. Where do I sign?"

Neil showed him, and watched him scribble his signature. "Thanks, cowboy," Neil said. "You've got guts." He handed the paper to the marshal. "There's one thing more I want you to do, Stubby. I reckon you have some dynamite on the place."

The rancher nodded. "You know how it is, Neil, up in this rocky country. Why?"

"Get it out and be ready to bring it over to the dam if I holler. If King calls his men off, I intend to blow up his dam again and wreck the ditch."

"And if he doesn't?"

Neil grinned. "That's something I'll have to decide later."

"Good luck," Stubby said. "Anyway, you won't find King at the dam. He and most of his crew rode back toward Warbird. I reckon they mean to head off the ranchers on the road from town."

"Then we'd better hurry." Neil ran out and vaulted into the saddle. Halfway to the dam the marshal drew up alongside him.

"It's your party, Wallace," he said. "I'm just here for the ride."

There were two men at the dam, Ace Pollock and one of his cronies. They stood facing Neil and the marshal, their hands close to their guns. Neil was pretty sure that Pollock, at least, would refuse to listen to reason, but he had to try anyway.

"The marshal has a paper here," he said. "It says you have to get off Box-S."

Pollock grinned. "Do you aim to put me off with a piece of paper, kid? You'll have to do better than that."

Even now, Will Turner's men might be riding to a showdown with Warbird. A lot

of good men would die, unless— Neil turned his horse a little.

"All right, Ace. Let's try it your way."

Ace's gun seemed to jump up to meet his hand, but his first bullet missed. Then Neil's gun spoke, and Ace fell over backward, a jagged tear in his shirt. Neil whirled to see the other man with his hands over his head, the marshal's gun covering him.

Neil grinned. "I thought you just came for the ride."

"Habit's a funny thing," Mulholland said, his voice alive for once.

Neil remembered the ranchers then, and hauled up on his reins. "Take this man's guns away from him and turn him loose. You're going to have your hands full blowing up the dam. When King hears the explosion, he'll probably turn back to investigate. I'm going to try to head him off."

"You'll need help," the marshal said.

"It's more or less a family affair," Neil said. "Get busy with that dynamite. I'll never catch King otherwise."

He spurred his horse and took off toward Warbird. Behind him, he heard the marshal hollering at Stubby. When he was halfway to the ranch the dynamite went off, and Neil sighed with relief. Unless Warbird and the ranchers had already met, King would probably turn back.

If Neil could talk to him before anyone got killed, there was just a chance he might make King listen to reason. Otherwise—well, the idea of killing his own father was sickening, but if it meant saving Will Turner and the others—

He topped a rise and saw Warbird below him. Across the way, a group of riders were galloping down the side of the hogback. Neil recognized King's big black in the lead. He put his own mount to a gallop and raced down to meet them.

THEY reached the yard from the opposite side at the same time, and King threw up his hand in a signal. The horses slowed to a walk. Neil pulled up his own animal and waited, the house at his back. King rode up to within ten feet and stopped.

"You!" he said fiercely. "Damn it, I thought you'd left."

Neil shook his head. "There was something I had to tell you first. I'm the one who blew up your damn just now. It wasn't the ranchers this time."

"So it was you." King drew back his lips savagely. "You damn fool, I know the ranchers didn't blow it up before. That fellow Suggs did it on his own, and Dutch had nothing to do with it." He swore. "What was the idea? You know I can build it again."

"But *why?*" Neil's voice was harsh. "You showed everybody what you can do. Why don't you let it drop? Maybe they laughed at you once, but they can't hurt you any more."

King grinned triumphantly. "You're damn right they can't, and when I get done with 'em they won't be able to hurt anybody." He made an angry gesture. "Get out of my way or I'll blast you out of the saddle!"

Neil knew then that King would never change. There was still the other way, although he knew that Bridger would kill him before he could get off a second shot. It was fitting, in a way. Both he and his father would be dead, but the valley would be safe. Still he hesitated, for it had come to him that he couldn't kill his own father, even though he was sure that King would feel no compunction about killing his son.

King's hand streaked toward his gun, but Neil's moved even faster. He twisted in the saddle, and saw Bridger with his gun in the clear. Neil's gun barked, and the ramrod's head snapped back. Another gun spoke. Neil waited for the pain to hit him, but oddly, he felt nothing. He turned and saw his father staring at him stupidly, the gun slipping out of his fingers.

Francesca spoke then, and Neil whirled around and saw her on the porch, a pistol in her hand. She had an odd smile on her face. "I had to do it, Neil. I couldn't give him up to another woman after all these years." She tilted the muzzle of her revolver upward.

"Wait!" Neil cried, but she didn't hear him. The gun went off and she slumped to the floor.

Neil looked around and saw the Warbird crew staring at him dazedly. Then King started to slip out of the saddle, and Corky pulled alongside and kept him from falling. Neil dropped from the saddle and grabbed King's

shoulders. One of the other riders came up to help him. They laid King on the ground.

For a moment it seemed that he was as dead as Bridger. Then he opened his eyes and looked up at Neil in surprise. "Francesca," he said. "I didn't think—" He shook his head feebly. "Tell her it's all right. I should've married her." He closed his eyes. When he opened them again he didn't seem to see Neil bending over him. "Everybody out!" he said. "We'll show thoes two-bit—" Then he was gone.

Neil straightened up and saw that there were more riders coming into the yard—Will Turner and his bunch. He looked around quickly at the Warbird crew.

"Keep your guns holstered!" he said sharply. "There'll be no more shooting here."

Nobody protested. Neil stepped out to meet the ranchers, and held up his hand. "It's all over, men." He pointed at the bodies on the ground.

Will Turner shook his head soberly. "I'm sorry, Neil. He was a good man once. I reckon he just went haywire." He turned to the men behind him. "Some of you boys take him in the house."

Two or three of the ranchers got down and approached the bodies uneasily, their eyes on the Warbird riders. Seeing this, Neil said evenly, "The way it looks now, I'll be running Warbird. Anybody who doesn't want to take orders can get his time. Corky Brill will be foreman from now on."

Two of the men moved away from the others, and one of them said wryly, "I'm not fixing to turn puncher again—not when I can sell my gun for twice as much money."

"Fair enough. Corky'll see that you're paid off. We won't be needing any gunfighters on Warbird any more." He turned back toward Turner. "I'd like to ask a favor, Mr. Turner. Have somebody take care of Francesca. It wasn't her fault."

He nodded toward the house, and Turner saw Francesca's body. He reached down and laid a hand on Neil's shoulder. "Sure, Neil. We'll take care of it." He looked up and frowned. "What about *her?* Can't she help us?"

Neil saw Delight standing in the doorway.

"No," he said, "don't let her touch Francesa. She's leaving Warbird, anyway."

Hearing him, Delight shrugged and went into the house. Neil turned and saw Will Turner smiling at him. The rancher nodded. "All right, boy, I'll go get Marcia, then. She always liked Francesca."

He started to turn away, but Neil reached up and caught his stirrup. "I'll go," he said. "I want to see Marcia anyway. There's something I want to explain." It sounded casual, but just thinking of Marcia made his pulse pound.

Turner grinned. "Go ahead, son. She's waiting for you."

Coming up in the next issue

AMBUSH!

With all the gold he carried, Henshaw was on guard . . . but he was no match for the holdup men's tricks

A Magazine-Length Novel

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

BRAND OF FEAR

Ex-convict Ben Yancey knew they wanted to frame him again . . . and now he was headed for the hangman's rope

Beginning a Hair-Raising Serial

By RICHARD HILL WILKINSON

THE GENERAL'S

HIS name was Jared Hamilton and he was fourteen years old. He found the watch in a stand of poplar on a day in early June when he took the cows out to pasture. The morning sun struck the dully gleaming gold of the watch, and he bent forward slowly and picked it up. It had flowing copperplate initials on the back and, when he opened the yellow case, he saw that the hands had stopped at twenty-one minutes past four.

He closed the watch and studied it in a deep reverent silence. Only rich and famous men owned gold watches, and rich and famous men were gentlemen. Maybe some day he'd own a watch like this one. Maybe some day he'd be a rich and famous gentleman.

He didn't want to think about who had lost the watch, not just yet. Because, when he did, he'd have to be honest and turn it over to his father, who in turn would give it to the Mounted Police at Fort Walsh so they could find the owner. The time would come when he'd be ready to give up the watch, but it wasn't today. For just a little while, it had to be his—until his father got back from Montana.

At last he slipped it into his overall pocket and started back for the house. His father and Johanna would be wondering where he was, and his father, his saddlebags packed and ready to leave for Fort Benton, would be getting impatient.

When he came in sight of the house, he saw that his father and Johanna were standing on the steps talking. His father's horse, with the bedroll tied behind the saddle, the frying pan dangling from the saddlehorn, stood hitched to one of the posts of the porch. His father's back was turned and Johanna was so absorbed in what he was saying that she didn't look up to see Jared approaching across the barnyard.

When Johanna spoke, he was near enough to hear what she said in her gentle school-book English. "But he is only fourteen years old, Samuel. He will get over being afraid."

His father's voice interrupted roughly. "I was ten years old when I bagged my first squirrel with my father's rifle. Jared hasn't touched my rifle yet, and he's been around it all his life. He's afraid of it. He's afraid of his own shadow, that boy is."

Jared stopped in his tracks, then stepped quickly to one side and hid behind the corner of the house. He didn't want them to see him standing there red-faced with shame, because what his father had said was true.

He'd grown up on a little farm in Ontario where he could see the neighbors' lamps at night, friendly and serene in the darkness, no more than a half mile away in any direction. Out here it was different. The sky was bigger and the land was bigger, and all of it was empty and silent and untamed. At night the only lamps they could see were their own.

Buffalo in great herds still shook the earth when they moved south in the autumn and came back again in the spring, and windstorms howled up out of nowhere and blotted out even the dim outlines of their own buildings. But Jared hated the Indians most of all. Their black eyes looked out of fierce narrow faces daubed with red or yellow warpaint, and he knew their ragged blankets hid their gleaming scalping knives.

His father was right; it wasn't just the rifle. There was nothing in this big empty land he wasn't afraid of. He felt his face go crimson with shame. That was why Johanna was here today. His father was going to Fort Benton to pick up some cattle and he wouldn't be back for a week.

Someone had to stay on the homestead to do the chores, but Jared couldn't stay there alone. He knew it, and his father knew it. So

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL THING, a prize of war . . . coveted and

WATCH

By M. E. BRADSHAW

Only a great man could have owned a watch like this, with its gleaming gold case

fought for by a band of Indians pitted against one timid, fearful boy

Johanna had come to stay with him while his father was away.

He looked at the ground. His head seemed natural when it was hanging. He was tired of being ashamed, but not even shame could make him brave when he wasn't. He was too big to cry, too small to be a man; lost and miserable somewhere in between.

He could hear his father and Johanna still talking. Johanna was always defending him against his father. She was a Dutch girl with clean bright hair and sober round blue eyes. Her family had emigrated from Holland and settled on a homestead ten miles from Jared's father's homestead.

Since she was the nearest neighbor girl, Jared's father had hired her to come over once a week to clean the house and cook them the one good meal they had till her next appearance. Then something had happened. Johanna and Jared's father had come to like each other so much they were going to get married.

Suddenly his father's voice stopped on a flat bitter note. Jared risked peering anxiously around the corner of the house. His father's back, still and angry, was turned to Johanna while he briskly went over his horse's gear.

Jared moved from behind the house. His legs felt leaden. Then something weighed gently against his thigh, heavy and comforting. It was the watch. He'd forgotten it for a minute, but he remembered it now. He was glad he'd decided to keep it.

When his father got back from Fort Benton, he'd tell him about it. But for now it was his. Suddenly he wasn't so afraid, and he wasn't so small after all.

His father heard him coming and turned around, his face hard. "Where you been?"

Jared hated to lie to his father. But after all, he wasn't really lying. "Taking the cows out to pasture."

"You were long enough about it," his father said. He turned his back and mounted, but when he looked at Johanna and Jared from the saddle, his face softened a little. "Good-bye, son. I should be back in a week." Then the softness was gone and his eyes, cold and level, moved to Johanna. "We'll have to have an understanding about this thing, Johanna, you and I."

Jared wished the ground would swallow him up. He knew what his father meant, all right. And it was his fault. It was all because he was afraid, and not even the watch in his pocket could make him brave.

There were hurt tears in Johanna's eyes. She moved slowly down the steps to the dusty ground. "And are you leaving, Samuel Hamilton, without saying good-bye as a man says to his sweetheart?"

"Of course not."

His father grinned faintly. He leaned from the saddle, scooped Johanna into one arm, and kissed her good-bye. Then he slapped his horse with the reins and the horse danced away. He waved to them from the gate and disappeared down the road toward Fort Walsh.

JARED felt a little better, but not much. The rifle on the wall in the kitchen was a Spencer. His father had bought it from a one-legged Yankee soldier in Niagara Falls, the year after the Civil War. Jared knew how to use it, from watching his father.

But his father had never put the rifle in his hands and made him shoot it. He wanted Jared to do that of his own accord. Jared knew his father was disappointed when the months slipped into years and all he ever did was give the rifle one quick glance and then look away.

Some day he'd take that rifle down and handle it like a man. But the day wasn't yet. As if she realized how badly he felt, Johanna gave him a bright smile from the porch.

"I am going to do baking, Jared. If you should wish to have help with the chores, I will be here."

Jared couldn't muster the faintest of smiles. "I won't need any help, Johanna."

He watched her go into the house and then wandered dully across the yard toward the barn. He longed to be a man, but he was so far from it that he couldn't blame his father for being disappointed in him.

All the time he was doing the chores, he thought of what his father had said to Johanna. He'd as good as told her that if he and Johanna were going to quarrel over Jared all the time, there was no use in getting married. His good-bye kiss after he'd said it really didn't count very much. Jared knew his father, and there was one thing about him he

knew better than anything else—he didn't say things he didn't mean.

By the time Jared had finished the chores, his face was long and glum. The only thing that comforted him was the sag of his overall pocket. He climbed up into the hayloft and sat near the open haymow doors, out of sight of the house, and took the watch out of his pocket.

The sun gleaming on the golden case brought back the sense of reverence he'd felt in the pasture. This watch was the most beautiful thing he'd seen since they'd left Ontario. He turned it over in his hands and studied the initials on the back. He'd only seen copperplate once before and it was hard to read, but after a while he decided the first initial was G and the last one C.

He settled down in the hay, speculating. G could be fore Gerald, George, Grant, lots more besides. C for Cooper, Clark, Carter, a hundred more names. They could have stood for anything.

Now that his father was gone and the watch was Jared's until his father got back from Fort Benton, he could afford to think about the man who'd lost it. The only thing Jared knew about him was that he was a traveler. He had to be. No men rich enough to own a watch like that lived anywhere near this homestead on the bald prairie.

Jared drew a mental picture of the man. He'd be tall and distinguished looking, maybe a little older than his father. He'd have a neat, well-groomed Van Dyke beard, and he'd wear a fawn-colored beaver hat. There'd be a bottle-green waistcoat under his Prince Albert frock-coat.

He'd have four matched horses dancing along in the harness of his carriage. He'd have a fine big home, maybe in Montreal or Toronto or even New York, and he'd be kind to his servants because he was a gentleman.

Jared sighed. It was a life he knew nothing about, and living as he and his father did on the outer edge of civilization in the Territory of Assiniboia, Canada, he doubted he ever would. He was as close to it now, he reckoned, as he would ever get, and the only thing that made it that way was the gold case in his hand.

He put the watch back in his pocket. It was time for lunch. He climbed down from the loft and crossed the barnyard toward the house. During the meal of cold meat sandwiches and blueberry pie, Johanna was very quiet, and Jared knew why. She too was worried about what his father had said.

Jared wished he could do something to make things better, to show his father he wasn't afraid, so he and Johanna wouldn't quarrel any more. The knowledge that he couldn't do it made Jared even quieter than Johanna.

The afternoon dragged away. Suppertime came, then darkness. Johanna's cheerful chatter didn't fool Jared. Her mind was on something else, and he knew what she was thinking. She couldn't stop being good to Jared, and trying to help him, which meant defending him a lot of the time. And that put her in danger of losing Jared's father.

She was sitting in the rocking chair beside the stove, mending his father's socks. Jared studied her secretly. Her bright round face was as fresh as a west wind, but right now there was a little furrow of worry between her blonde eyebrows.

He liked her a lot, and he'd been glad to see the empty look slowly disappearing from his father's eyes as her bustling presence and cheerful stilted English filled the house every Thursday. He liked her too much to let her frown stay.

He looked at the rifle on the wall. If he only could take it down, cradle it in the crook of his arm, and say to Johanna, I'm going to have a look around outside, just to see that everything's all right—

His chair scraped suddenly on the floor. He knew that Johanna's eyes, wide and startled and yet somehow expectant, fastened on him when he squared his shoulders and walked to the bracket on the wall holding the rifle. He looked at it without realizing that his jaw was set. He put out his hand and touched the hard cold smoothness of the walnut butt with his fingers. He raised his arms to take the rifle down.

He froze that way. For a minute he thought he was going to be sick. Then he realized that his hands, one around the barrel and the other under the butt, were shaking. His face was glistening with sweat and his knees had become water.

HE TURNED and ran from the kitchen, knowing that Johanna's eyes followed him, thoughtful and shadowed and sad. He closed the door of his room behind him and savagely kicked the stout log leg of his bed until he hurt his foot even through his thick hide boots.

He sat on the edge of the bed in the dark and stared hopelessly at the crack of light under the door. He didn't know how much time had passed—fifteen minutes or an hour—when he heard the horse outside. He groped his way to the tiny window and peered out. It was Hugh MacLean, the Mounted Police constable from Forth Walsh, stopping by on patrol.

Jared sighed. Johanna would invite Hugh in. Jared would have to go out and put in an appearance, or Hugh would think something was wrong—which it really was. But all he could do, Jared reckoned miserably, was hide his troubles.

He left his room and followed Johanna to the door when she went to answer Hugh's knock. He had to admit there was something comforting in the way Hugh's solid red-coated bulk filled the doorway as he entered the parlor. Then Hugh's startled glance took in Johanna for the first time.

"What, you here, Johanna? It's not Thursday."

Johanna smiled quietly. She said, "I am here to keep house for Jared. With two men to keep a house, they can manage. But one, never."

Hugh didn't smile back. In fact, it seemed to Jared that his pleasant fleshy face was a shade more than sober. He looked concerned, Jared thought.

"Where's Sam?"

"He has taken a trip to Fort Benton for some cattle to buy," Johanna said. Jared knew she'd seen the concern in Hugh's face too, because it had upset her English a little. "Why is it you ask, Constable MacLean?"

"I was just wondering," Hugh said, but the words hung oddly lame in the tiny parlor.

Johanna shared a brief worried glance over her shoulder with Jared, but when she looked back at Hugh she was smiling again. "I hope that for a cup of tea you have time, Constable."

Hugh's grin swept the concern from his face. "I have. Thank you, Johanna."

They went to sit in the kitchen and Johanna stirred up the coals in the stove and put the kettles on. But Jared sensed that, like himself, she was waiting uneasily for Hugh to tell them what he'd come to say to Jared's father. They chatted for a few minutes, and then Hugh toyed with the mug Jared had set in front of him, his face thoughtful.

"So Sam's away. Well—" he grinned at Jared—"there's still a man on the place."

Jared wanted to say, no there isn't. If he couldn't be brave, he could at least be honest. But the words stuck in his throat and he looked quickly away from Hugh's good-humored gray eyes. The kettle started to boil. Johanna got up and moved to the stove.

Hugh looked grave again, but he spoke lightly. "Have you seen any strange Indians around here lately—I mean besides the Crees and Blackfeet?"

Jared's mouth went dry. Why did Hugh have to talk about Indians now? He shook his head at Hugh for answer, trying to appear indifferent. Johanna took down the teapot and briskly measured out the tea, but there was a tiny quaver of doubt in her voice when she spoke.

"Not that I—remember." Her English was getting confused; Jared knew she'd had to stop and think what to say. Then she poured boiling water into the teapot and looked straight at Hugh. "There are strange Indians in the neighborhood?"

"Well, yes." Hugh frowned, and Jared knew that, whatever it was, Hugh didn't want to tell them, but he had to. "The whole Sioux nation is here, or what's left of it. They came across the line to get away from the American troops." He paused. "Do you remember the massacre in Montana about a year ago, when the Sioux wiped out about two hundred soldiers?

"Well, the Queen promised them refuge in Canada, and they've decided to take it. They paid their respects at Fort Walsh two days ago. We told them to stay where we could keep an eye on them, but they've disappeared."

He stopped. Johanna moved to the table and poured the tea, and Jared saw that her

hand was shaking. Hugh must have seen it too, because he said, "There's nothing to worry about. They came here to get away from fighting, not to start it. All the same—"

His voice trailed off. Jared ran his tongue over his lips. "All the same, what?"

"If they come around looking for food, give it to them, but keep the doors locked and pass it out a window. They're not in Canada because they like us any better than they do the Americans. They're here because they've been promised they'd be safe."

Johanna's round blue eyes were a little wider than usual. She asked, "And so you have come, Constable, to warn us to be on guard against these Indians?"

"Just on the lookout, that's all. I doubt that there'll be any trouble, because they've already had enough. But a word to the wise never hurt anyone. Just be careful not to antagonize them."

He picked up his cup and drank some tea. Then he put the cup down and said, "By the way, if you do see any of them, we'd like to know about it. We've doubled the patrols in the vicinity, so I'll be back this way tomorrow night instead of Thursday, and you could let me know then.

"It seems the Sioux did some looting after the Little Bighorn; they robbed most of the bodies. That's why we want to find them now. We'd like to get back some of the loot they took, and return it to the soldiers' relatives."

JARED felt the blood drain from his face. His thought were racing wildly, but out of the jumble of confusion a suspicion, sinister and unshakeable, dawned on him. He'd wondered how a gold watch had gotten into his father's pasture. Now he knew. It wasn't a gentleman's watch at all; it was a soldier's watch.

He'd looked for the tracks of a wagon, or even footprints, near the watch, but there'd been none. That was because it had rained last night, and rain washed away tracks. Only it couldn't wash away from the watchful eyes of the redcoats at Fort Walsh the watch the Sioux had dropped when they'd camped in the pasture the night before.

He had to confirm that suspicion. He swallowed against the constriction in his throat and asked unsteadily, "Loot like what?"

"Identification tags, watches, even some money."

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

By S. Omar Barker

Girls seldom fall for
Men they're too tall for.

Jared's eyes dropped numbly to the mug of tea in front of him. The room was spinning around. Hugh had mentioned a man whose name started with C. Probably the watch had belonged to him. Jared should say now that he'd found the watch, and let Hugh take it back to Fort Walsh. He should do it just to be honest—aside from the fact that the Sioux had stolen the watch and they'd try to get it back from whoever had found it.

Under the table, he slipped his hand into his overall pocket and touched the watch. He shouldn't have done it, because he knew then he couldn't give it up, not yet. For just a while longer, it had to be his.

He raised his eyes and looked at Hugh. "That man you said, Cus—"

"Custer?"

"Yes. Who was he?"

"The general."

"Oh," Jared said

He seemed to find it hard to breathe. The Sioux wouldn't give up in a hurry a watch they'd taken from a general. It was a prize of war, and when they discovered they'd lost it, they'd come back to look for it.

Still, he wasn't sure it was Custer's watch. A dozen men in two hundred could have names beginning with C. And if it weren't the general's watch, the Sioux might not come back for it.

Hugh's chair scraped on the floor. He stood up, thanked Johanna for the tea, and went to the door. Johanna went with him, and Jared trailed behind. Johanna and Hugh said good night and Johanna went back to the kitchen. Hugh crossed the porch and went down the steps.

Jared moved to the doorway and watched Hugh mount. He had to know if the watch in his pocket was General Custer's or not. Maybe if he knew the general's first name—

Hugh turned his horse around and started to ride away, and then Jared's boots were thumping across the porch and down the steps as he raced after him and caught his stirrup. He looked up into Hugh's face, panting.

"What was the general's first name?"

"I'm not sure. George or something, I think. Why?"

"I—just wondered," Jared said.

His knees were weak again. He couldn't pretend any longer; he had the general's watch. And because he knew the Sioux would try to get it back, having it made him more afraid than he'd ever been in his life.

Yet, strangely, he still wanted the watch. If he gave it to Hugh now, he wouldn't have to be afraid of the Sioux when they came back to look for it. But he couldn't do it. He stood at Hugh's stirrup, lost in a sea of fear and confusion.

When Hugh spoke, his voice seemed to come from a long way off. "You're as white as a sheet, Jared. Are you sick?"

Jared looked up quickly. If he didn't get hold of himself, Hugh was going to become suspicious. And if he started asking questions, the truth would come out and Jared would have to give up the watch.

He managed a faint grin. "No, not sick. I'm just hoping the Sioux don't get hungry anywhere near here."

Hugh chuckled. "They probably won't. Don't worry too much about it. I'll stop back again tomorrow night. So long, Jared."

"So long," Jared said.

He watched Hugh ride through the gate and disappear behind the thick growth of willows at the end of the fence before he walked slowly back to the porch.

Johanna had lit the lamp in the parlor. He saw through the window that her sewing basket was on the floor at her feet and that her head was bent over a pair of his father's overalls. He took the watch out of his pocket and, by the faint light from the lamp, read the name into the initials—George Custer.

All at once his silent tears were splashing off the gold case because, for a minute, it seemed as if he knew the man who had not been afraid of anything, even of the Sioux when they'd killed him.

He drew his sleeve across his face, put the watch back in his pocket, and went into the house. He knew what he had to do now. He had to find a hiding place for the watch where the Sioux wouldn't look if they did come back. Johanna called to him as he passed the parlor door.

"Come in and sit with me until it is time to go to bed, Jared."

He stopped in the doorway. "In a minute," he said, and went on into the kitchen.

He stood a moment, looking around thoughtfully. Drawers and cupboards were out; they were the first places the Indians would look if they did come back. His eyes moved to the stove. He could put the watch in the ash pan under the grate, maybe. But they'd be sure to look there too .

His eyes wandered up the stovepipe and stopped at the handle of the draft. He crossed the kitchen and opened the draft. The slot was just big enough to get the watch through. He slipped his fingers into the opening and felt around. There was a small knob on the inside where the handle of the draft went through the metal.

HIS fingers came out grimy, but he didn't care. He'd found the hiding place he wanted. He wiped his fingers on his pants, and went to the sideboard, and took out the little drawstring bag the silver salt

and pepper shakers were wrapped in to keep them from tarnishing.

He took the shakers out of the bag and put them back in the sideboard. He put the watch in the bag and hung the bag by its drawstring from the little knob inside the stovepipe where the handle of the draft was soldered to the metal.

But it wasn't enough. He knew it. If the Indians thought the watch was in the house, they'd tear the place apart before they gave up looking for it. If they came, he'd have to make them think the watch was somewhere else, someplace where they couldn't get it.

He frowned in thought over it. Something about the same weight and size as the watch, wrapped in a handkerchief, would fool them. But if they got it, they'd soon find out it wasn't the watch. No, he'd have to dispose of the package for good, and they'd have to see him do it.

He could burn it, maybe. But they could pull it out of the fire before whatever was in the handkerchief was burned, and find it wasn't the watch. He could throw the package away. That was it; he'd throw it into the creek.

But there was something wrong with that too. The water in the creek was swift and clear and only a foot deep. They could see the package lying on the bottom. And the creek was three yards from the house. He'd never get to it before they caught him.

He must throw it away somewhere. He could throw it down the well. *Down the well.* He made a soft noise of amazement. That was it. The well was thrity feet deep and less than a foot across. Once the handkerchief and whatever he found to put in it went down the well, it was gone for good. Even the Sioux would know it.

Now he had to think of something to put inside the handkerchief. That was easy. A small-sized potato would do it. He stood still for a minute, feeling suddenly foolish. Maybe he'd done a lot of thinking for nothing. Maybe they wouldn't come at all. He thought wryly that he wouldn't be angry if they didn't. At any rate, he was finished thinking about it until they did come.

Me blew out the lamp in the kitchen. He'd go and sit with Johanna now. He turned his head and glanced out the kitchen window. Then his heart gave a terrible leap and his carefully assorted thoughts collapsed in a heap like a house of cards. The massive fathered headdresses and the lances and rifles of a band of Indians were outlined against the stars just beyond the barnyard fence.

He flattened his back against the wall, while sweat came out on his forehead and his mind raced wildly. The Crees didn't travel at night, and the Blackfeet didn't hunt in the Cypress Hills. It was the Sioux, looking for the watch. He knew it. And they were coming to look in the house before they went on to the pasture.

He plunged blindly from the wall into the center of the room. He was standing on the trapdoor into the root cellar. He jumped off it and snatched it open. His foot missed the first rung of the ladder and he sprawled on his face among the potatoes. His frantic groping fingers caught one up.

He climbed out of the cellar, slammed the trapdoor, and snatched a handkerchief from the drawer in the sideboard. He tied the potato in it with fingers that shook so badly he could hardly do it at all.

His breath was growing loud in his throat. He opened the kitchen door a crack and looked out. The Indians were filing through the barnyard gate on their ponies. The well was halfway between the house and the gate, and he had to get to the well before they did.

Behind him, Johanna's voice began, "Jared, what on earth is going on?"

There wasn't time to tell her. He flung the door open and ran outside. He had to be sure they saw him, saw the weighted handkerchief. He shouted, "I found the general's watch, but you won't get it! It's going down the well, and you'll never pull it out!"

At his shout, Indians, ponies, and all, froze to the stillness of a dark brooding painting. Then he was at the well, his hand lifting and coming down swiftly. A second later he heard the splash of invisible water thirty feet below the ground.

The painting came to life as the Indians surged, whooping, around the well. They leaped from their ponies around him, and he sank to his knees in a nightmare of beaded leather leggings and bright flapping blankets.

A hand caught his shirt and hauled him to his feet. The blade of the scalping knife at his throat was crusted with something dark, and he gagged convulsively. Another hand closed leaped from their ponies around him, and he was staring into the broad flat face of a stocky Indian with wisps of gray in his thin untidy braids.

"You throw watch of Yellowhair in well, white boy?"

Jared thought of the battlefield where the general had lain brave and dead. He thought of his watch, hanging safe inside the stovepipe in the kitchen, and it gave him a fierce courage he'd never known before. It even made him forget the knife at his throat.

He looked into the Indian's angry scowling face. He shouted, "Yes, I did, and I'm glad! You have no right to it! You had to kill him to get it! Now it'll stay in the well forever!"

He felt the knife press harder against his throat. The hand in his hair tightened, pulling his head farther back. For a minute the sights and sounds around him grew faint. There was a faraway gibbering above his head, and then the hand in his hair let go and his head lolled forward. The fist holding his shirt shook him once, flattened out against his chest, and sent him sprawling on his back into a forest of leggings and moccasins.

AFTER a while he sat up slowly. The Indians were still all around him, but in the argument among themselves about getting what they thought was the watch out of the well, they'd forgotten him.

He thought about crawling away. He found he couldn't. The magnificent bubble of courage that had let him shout defiantly into the Indians' faces had burst, leaving him sick and shaken and lifeless. The only thing that encouraged him was the fact that sooner or later they'd give up and go.

He stayed where he was on the ground. A few minutes—that seemed like an eternity—later, the short Indian with the gray braids shouted at the others in Sioux, walked over and shook his fist at Jared, then got on his pony.

The others mounted too, and unwillingly followed the gray-haired Indian out of the barnyard. A wheezing sob of relief that he couldn't contain any longer left Jared. Then, at the gate, one young Indian wheeled his pony, and a war whoop split the air. He sent his pony charging back across the dusty ground and a thin naked arm lifted his lance above his head.

Jared came to his hands and knees, scrambling wildly to get out of the way of the animal's thrashing forehoofs. His mouth fell open slackly as the Indian's arm swooped down. Something stung his leg and the lance, it head buried with a swish and a thud, stood quivering beside him, where it had pinned his overalls to the ground.

The Indian wheeled again and rode off after the others. Jared collapsed against the lance and cried weakly. Strangely, almost fiercely, he wasn't ashamed of these tears. An hour ago he'd thought he'd known what fear was. He knew now that he'd been wrong. Now he'd plumbed the depths. But it was over, and he was still alive.

From the kitchen door, Johanna started to scream, and Jared realized vaguely she thought the lance had impaled him. She came running toward him, wild-eyed and hysterical, and even when she got to him the screams didn't stop. She half knelt, half fell beside him.

Jared gripped her hands hard and shouted her down. "I'm all right, Johanna, I tell you! I'm all right!"

She broke into deep relieved sobs. Jared got to his knees, took the lance with both hands, and pulled it from the ground. His overalls were freed then, and he stood up. His legs were shaky at first, but their strength returned gradually.

In one brief terror-filled second he'd learned a lesson he'd never forget. Fear was part of life, like breathing. But the shadowy imaginings of his own mind and fear—real, honest, forthright fear—were two different things. Honest fear was nothing to be ashamed of.

His old vague fearful imaginings were gone. He knew it. And they'd never come back, because things were different now. Now he had better sense; he knew when to be afraid. It wasn't from sunup to sundown, and it didn't happen often. Maybe half a dozen times in his life, circumstances would force a man to know real fear. He stooped and put his hand through the hole the lance head had made in

his overalls. It was a big one. He straightend up and looked after the Sioux, out of sight in a gully, and a deep, quiet anger rose in him. They'd ruined his overalls. They'd pinned him to the ground on his father's land, land they had no right to set foot on.

There was determination in his voice when he took Johanna's arm. "Come on. Let's get back to the house."

Johanna was still unnerved and shaking. When they entered the kitchen, Jared lit the lamp with hands that were sure and steady. He had a lot of explaining to do to Johanna. She still didn't know what it was all about. But first there was something he had to do. He doubted that the Sioux would be back, but it was best to be ready for them.

He left the watch where it was. He'd tell her about it, but there was no need to take it out of its hiding place. He stepped to the bracket on the wall and took the rifle down. He balanced it in his hands, and its weight was solid and reassuring.

He cradled it in the crook of his arm the way his father did, the muzzle pointing at the floor, wishing his father were here to see but knowing it didn't matter that he wasn't.

When his father got home, he'd find out a lot of things for himself. Jared smiled. Johanna would never have to defend him against his father again. In the stillness of the kitchen a stranger was facing Johanna, ready to tell her the story—a man, young, but still a man.

He knew from the warm glow of her face that she understood. She smiled quietly, happily and said, "I am glad for you, Jared." Then a frown tugged at her blonde eyebrows and she made a bewildered gesture. "But, what this is about, I do not know."

Jared looked once at the handle of the draft on the stovepipe. He saw the watch again in his mind, its soft dull gold, its handsome graceful initials on the back of the case. He loved it still, and he always would. Not for its own sake, either, as he had this morning in the pasture. If he'd gone on loving it for its own sake, in time he would have forgotten it.

Now he could never forget.

But the time had come to give it up. So, silently, he said a reverent good-bye to the general's watch, before he started to speak.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. One of the following Philip's was an army officer for whom a town in Wyoming is named, one was a Texas gambler shot by Wild Bill Hickok, one is a popular writer for RANCH ROMANCES. You sort them out: Philip Ketchum, Philip Coe, Philip Sheridan.

2. Are sage hen, prairie chicken, and dusky grouse just different names for the same Western game bird?

3. What would you do with a *bosal* (bo-SAHL): eat it, catch a cow with it, drink it, use it on a horse, or make a fire with it?

4. The "stomping ground" of Clay Allison, famous Western gunfighter, was which: Cimarrón in Kansas, Cimarrón in Colorado, or Cimarrón in New Mexico?

5. Bass Outlaw and Sam Bass are both names known to fame in the old West. Which was an outlaw, which a fast-shooting Texas Ranger?

6. What is the more usual color name of a horse sometimes called a "pumpkin skin?"

7. Immigrant butter, Texas butter, old cheap-and-easy, sowbelly son, and biscuit plaster are cowcamp slang for what item of chuck?

8. "Old Pancake" Comstock gave his name to what famous bonanza in what Territory, now a state?

9. On the frontier the term "Indian pony" was often used to mean a horse of what color or color pattern?

10. What famous outlaw's head was jerked clear off his body when he was hanged at Clayton, New Mexico?

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 87. **Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.**

Man without

HE COULDN'T REMEMBER anything . . . except the feeling

FIRST of all, as he opened his eyes, he saw the girl. She was kneeling by the narrow little cot where he lay, her eyes full of concern. That was strange to him, as strange as this wide log-walled room. He did not remember it, or the girl.

He put his forearm over his eyes, because they ached intolerably. The twinge of movement told him that he was sore from head to foot, and his face and hands felt raw. He groaned.

a Past

By T. V. OLSEN

that he had once loved this land where now he was a stranger

"Rest," the girl said. "You've had a bad time."

He closed his eyes tightly. He could remember only that he had staggered for what had seemed hours, under a blazing sun. He could remember falling and getting up to stagger on under the prod of a nameless urgency, only to fall again. His mouth had become an oven, his tongue was swollen with thirst.

But where am I now? he thought. And then he had another, more terrifying, thought—who am I? He tried to recall, groaned again with the effort, and gave up.

He heard the girl say, "He's in here, Doctor."

He opened his eyes again to see the stout gray-haired man in a baggy suit crouch by the cot and open his black bag. The doctor was brisk and officious looking. He began his examination

The sick youth could see a second man standing behind the doctor. He was of middle age, whip lean, and hard as mahogany. His drooping steerhorn mustaches hid the expression of his mouth, but there was kindly concern in his gray eyes. He wore the rough clothes of a ranchman.

This man said to the girl, "When did he wake up, Lottie? Did he give you any trouble?"

"He came to just now, Angus," she said. "He's been quiet till now. He's in pain, though."

"No wonder," Angus grunted. "The Arizona desert at high noon is no place to be taking a stroll. His face and hands are sunburned. He must have been pretty pale before. He's a city fella, judging from his clothes."

"That explains it," the girl said.

She folded her strong brown arms, bare where she'd rolled her flannel shirtsleeves to the elbow. The young man on the cot saw a glint of humor add itself to the concern in her green eyes.

She was not tall, but her body looked compact and firm in the flannel shirt and tight pants. Her chestnut hair was gathered to the back of her head with a bit of ribbon. The young man looked away, feeling embarrassment even above the pain of his hurts.

The doctor, finished, stood up with a grunt. "No broken bones. He's black-and-blue, though. Did he get thrown by his horse?"

"I couldn't say," Angus said tersely. "He came staggering into the house an hour ago, on foot, babbling and out of his head. I brought him inside, then hitched up and came in to town to fetch you."

"There's a nasty cut here," the doctor said. He touched the raw line of fire over the patient's temple; the sick man jerked his head away. "Easy, young feller; I'm trying to help you. Lottie, boil some water. I'll soak the dried blood away and put on a dressing." He looked down speculatively at the young man's hard wary eyes. "What's your name, boy?"

The young man said nothing.

"Well?"

"I'm trying to remember." His voice sounded parched and cracked to his own ears, and the movements of speech hurt his throat. He was suddenly aware of a burning thirst. "Can I have a drink?"

"I don't see why not." The doctor nodded to Angus, who silently fetched a dipperful of water and handed it to the doctor. The medico tilted it to the youth's cracked lips; he gulped eagerly and drained it.

"That's enough for a while," the doctor said sternly. "Now what do you mean, you can't remember?"

"I can't, that's all," he said doggedly.

The doctor said sharply, "Where are you from?"

The sick man shook his head helplessly, wincing with the motion.

"I told you, I don't know."

AN EXPRESSION of wonder replaced the doctor's professionally impersonal briskness. He felt gingerly around the gash on the young man's head. Then he lifted his stubby-fingered hand and held it a yard from the young man's face.

"How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Two."

The doctor straightened up, shaking his head, and turned to Angus. "His skull's intact, his vision's as clear as a bell. That knock on the head must have screwed up his memory."

"How's that, Doc?"

"The medical profession calls it amnesia."

Angus stroked his silky steerhorns and delivered a thoughtful diagnosis. "Maybe another crack on the head—"

"On the theory," Doc snapped, "that loss of memory incurred by a head blow might be restored by a similar blow?"

"I had something of the sort in mind."

"Well, get rid of it!" Doc said. "You might kill him or permanently impair the damaged cells. Lots of rest, good food, and proper care are his best chance for recovery. Who's going to give it to him?"

"Why, Doc, you never heard of Angus

Horn's turning out a man who needed help, did you?"

Doc snorted. "Hogtie me hand and foot if I'd abandon any patient to your tender mercies! If Lottie will play nurse, though, I'd say he's as well off here as anywhere." He glanced a question at the girl as she came in with a pan of boiling water, and she nodded in agreement.

The doctor dressed the cut, closed his black bag, and headed for the door, giving Lottie instructions for the patient's care. "His physical hurts don't come to much," the young man heard the doctor say as he and the girl stepped into the yard. "As for his memory, it should come back under proper treatment. I'll be around again in a couple of days."

Angus Horne pulled a chair up to the cot and drew a blackened pipe from his shirt pocket. He lit it, puffing slowly. "Son," Angus said, "I'll lay it on the line. This is a one-loop spread I've got. My brother—he was Lottie's father—owned it sixteen years ago when the Mescaleroes were still running wild through the country.

"They raided this place, burned it, and massacred my brother and his family. Lottie was saved because she was staying at the ranch of an older sister and her husband at the time.

"My brother Jim must have foreseen something of the sort, because he willed me his property with the provision that I'd care for any surviving members of his family. I was a no-account drifter, a little too quick with a gun, and I welcomed the chance. I re-built the place and took Lottie in. She grew up here."

Angus paused, puffing fitfully at his pipe. "We hold the place down alone. Lottie can work, ride, and shoot like a man. But it's no way for a seventeen-year-old miss to grow up. You'll be well shortly. If you want to stay here and work for your keep, I'll be glad to have you. Then my niece can take over a woman's rightful duties in the house, where she belongs."

"I don't know anything about—"

Angus waved his pipe. "I guessed that. "You're a city man, aren't you? Oh, I forgot; you can't remember. You're young and husky looking for a city lad. You can learn—if you don't mind some trouble along the way."

Uncertain, sick, and bewildered, the young man said he'd stay.

"Fine," Angus said meditatively "Now, we should have some name to cuss you by." He thought a moment, then absently knocked his pipe out against the chair, littering the clean-swept floor with ashes. The gesture was a quick, embarrassed one.

"If you don't mind—well, when I was young, I had most of my wild times below the border. I had a Mexican wife. She died bearing my son, and the boy didn't live a year." Angus's hard-planed face softened a little. "I'd made a lot of plans for little Johnny. If he'd lived, he'd be about your age. I'd as soon call you Johnny as anything else. Is that all right with you?"

The young man nodded.

"Good," Angus said. "And you're a green hand, so there's your second handle—Johnny Green."

In the next two days, Johnny Green's battered body recovered with the quick resilience of youth, while his past remained a staring blank in his mind. During that time, he heard no more about the "trouble" Angus had mentioned.

On the second day, Johnny Green limped outside and watched the sun die in a crown of gold fire on the distant mesa which closed off the western horizon, where the vast sweep of this land was lost to sight. It was all strange to him, yet held a pleasant sense of homecoming. He could find no reason for this feeling, though he racked his memory endlessly.

At dawn of the third day, Angus roused him out, saying, "Do you feel well enough to ride to town? I thought we might buy you an outfit. And maybe you'll see something familiar."

JOHNNY agreed eagerly. He still felt a little cramped, a little sore, and his sunburn had begun a painful peeling, but he felt alert and restless, ready for anything. Lottie served their breakfast. He hesitantly returned her warm smile, then bent to his plate.

These were real folks, he thought. He was amazed at their open-handed acceptance of an

injured stranger. He felt awkward and grateful in the face of this kindness, and made a silent promise that they wouldn't be sorry.

After breakfast, Angus hitched the team to a buckboard, and, with Johnny beside him, lifted the horses into a trot along the old wagon road. They hit the town of Morene an hour later. It was a hybrid Mexican-American hamlet, a patchwork of adobe buildings flanking a mud-rutted street. Johnny Green eyed it with a strained expression in his dark eyes.

Angus pulled up the team at a tie-rail and glanced at him. "Nothing's familiar, eh?"

He shook his head. They climbed down and went into the general store. Angus scooped up a handful of crackers from a barrel, munched them, and said to the clerk, "This feller needs some work clothes, Harvey—a complete outfit. Fix him up, eh?"

The clerk sized up the young man, then took shirt, trousers, hat, and boots from the shelves. "Try these on for size. You can change in the storeroom."

Johnny took off his dirty, wrinkled traveling suit, rolled it in a bundle, and left the storeroom in stiff new clothes, feeling almost like a new man. He found Angus leaning against the counter in conversation with a ruddy-faced, pot-bellied man.

Angus looked up, eyeing his new hand with an approving nod. "That looks more like it." He indicated the pot-bellied man. "This is Gus Withersteen, who owns the GW Corrals down the street. Gus, this is my new hand, Johnny Green."

"We've met," Gus boomed, extending a fleshy hand. "Well, young feller, are you straddling any more tough ones these days?" He guffawed.

Angus eyed the corral owner narrowly. "Do you know him?"

"Hell, yes. This tenderfoot got off the train here four days ago. He came straight over to my place and wanted to buy a horse. Well, Bull Munson—you know, Cliff Sunderson's foreman—"

"I know him," Angus said dryly. "Go on. What happened?"

"Bull and some of the other Long S crew men were loafing around my place, it being Saturday. When they saw this lad come in, with tenderfoot written all over him, you can guess what happened."

"I can guess," Angus said, "but tell it anyway." This was for Johnny Green's benefit.

"Well, hell." Gus sounded a little defensive. "You know how the boys like to josh a green hand. They picked out a half-broken bronc for the lad here, telling him it was gentle as pie—and they slipped a burr under the saddle to boot. I kept my mouth shut, because the last time I tried to stop one of their jokes, they dunked me in the water trough.

"As soon as the boy hit the saddle, he got thrown. He sailed clean into a corral post and fetched his head a wallop you could hear halfway across town. It knocked him cold. I thought he was killed; so did Bull and the boys. They cleared out fast. I felt for his heart then and it was still strong, so I took off to find Doc Lane.

"But he was out on a call, and by the time I came back the kid was gone. It looked as if he came to, dusted himself off, and walked away. Lad, you must have a skull of iron."

"Try to remember, Gus," said Angus sharply. "Did he give you his name?"

"No. I'm sure of that. Say, is something wrong here?"

Angus explained Johnny Green's predicament.

"Hellfire!" Gus said admiringly. "He must have picked himself up and walked clear to your ranch under an Arizona sun, without knowing it! He's some tenderfoot."

Johnny said, "I remember walking for a long time. I don't recall this town, or the horse, or you, or those others."

Gus clucked sympathetically, said he was sorry he couldn't be of more help, and left the store.

"Well, that's something," Angus said. "At least now we know how it happened. Let's step across the street and baptize you right."

In Rudabaugh's saloon, Angus told the bartender, "Rudy, we're here to break Johnny in on that bottled lightning you call whisky."

The first shot brought tears to Johnny's eyes and scoured his throat with fire. But when the fumes began rising to his head, he found it was easy to identify himself with Johnny Green, ranchhand. It was best, having a new name for a new life.

Johnny ducked easily under Cliff's first wild swing

THEY were pouring a second round when the swinging doors parted and three cowhands jostled in. The sight of Johnny brought them up short. The man in the lead was built like a bull—that was Johnny's first impression.

His head was like a bristling bullet sinking, neckless, into his shoulders, and black hair protruded in all directions from under his hat brim. His eyes were as small and savage as a wild peccary's.

"Boys," he said. "it's our friend from the corral. It looks as if we didn't finish the job, after all. And here's a second chance."

Angus whirled from the bar, dropping his hand to the holstered Colt's at his hip. "Bull, you and your men have done enough to this boy."

"Angus Horne, the old mother hen," Bull Munson sneered. He shrugged then, his hog-like eyes growing smaller and meaner. "Well, no man in this country ever did claim to match you in gunplay. Since the tenderfoot's attached himself to your apron strings, the game's cinched for your side."

"Just a minute," Johnny Green said softly. He set his glass on the bar and faced Bull. "I fight my own fights."

"Don't be a damned fool, boy," Angus snapped. "He'll break you in half."

"He can start anytime, if he's not afraid he'll get choked by one of those apron strings," Johnny said.

Bull Munson growled in his throat. "Tenderfoot, come ahead."

Without hesitation, Johnny moved to meet him. He slipped under Bull's first blow and came up slashing unreservedly at his face and body. Bull Munson stopped his offensive and retreated, backpedaling, throwing up his crossed arms to protect his face from a flurry of jabs.

Johnny sank his fist deep into Bull's yielding stomach. When Bull dropped his arms, Johnny hit him squarely on the point of the jaw with a straight-arm blow that buckled him to the floor.

Johnny stepped back, his fists still doubled, breathing only a little faster. He settled a rash gaze on the other two Long S punchers and challenged sharply, "Well?"

Johnny Green was not a big man, but he was a wiry bundle of stockily-built muscle, and he had moved almost too fast for the two punchers to follow. But they knew that from the moment Bull Munson had moved against this tenderfoot stranger, he hadn't stood a shadow of a chance. This cold fact cowed them and held them motionless.

Angus took Johnny's arm, saying quietly, "All right, son, you've proved your point. Now let's get the hell out of here!"

Outside, as they moved across to the buckboard, Angus demanded, "Where'd you learn to fight like that?"

Johnny smiled and shook his head. Angus growled, "I forgot. But right now, I'd give a peck of double eagles to know your past."

As they rode back to Angus's Whippletree spread, Johnny said, "Does this Munson have anything to do with that trouble you mentioned the other day?"

Angus gave him a quick sidelong glance. "So you've been thinking about that. I'm sorry I brought it up. I was hoping to keep you, a stranger, out of our problems."

Johnny smiled faintly. "It looks as if I'm neck deep in 'em."

"It sure does look that way, after what happened. All right, here's the story."

Angus explained that the huge Long S ranchlands bordered on his own Whippletree and a number of smaller ranches. The main water supply for all the ranches on this side of the big mesa was one waterhole called Indigo Springs.

It was on the boundary between Cliff Sunderson's Long S and Angus's Whippletree, and open, by tacit agreement, for the use of all But the present dry season, the worst Angus had ever seen, had lowered the water level considerably, and there wasn't enough to supply all the small ranches' stock and Long S's too.

Lately Cliff Sunderson had shown a tyrant's hand, saying that his father had used that waterhole before any of the others had built here—which was true—and that Long S therefore had a prior claim. He wanted to fence the hole off from the little men. He would have done it too, for they were a docile lot, except, Angus mentioned modestly, for himself.

Angus had never backed down in his life, and he'd had a considerable reputation with a gun in his younger days. He was the mainstay of the small ranchers. The ranchers knew it, and so did Cliff Sunderson. Cliff was still cautious enough not to make any effort to monopolize the water supply by force.

ANGUS fingered the reins for a while in silence after his explanation. Then he said, "Cliff's like his old man. Old Jard Sunderson pioneered this country, got wealthy and big-headed, and sent his kid East. He got himself an education in some big university, and came back here two years ago to take over the Long S when old Jard died.

"Cliff's only twenty-six now, but he handles the Long S as well as Jard ever did. He's gone into other interests too, and he's already nearly doubled the fortune the old man left him. The East didn't soften Cliff any; he's as tough as nails and smart as a whip. He got it into his head about a year back that he wanted to marry Lottie. He came up to my place to court her every night for a month. She would have none of him, for all his Eastern sass. Cliff was too swell-headed to see it; he kept right on coming till this trouble over the water began."

Johnny didn't say anything. He was glad, though; for all her spunk—which Angus had mentioned as coming mighty close to mulishness at times—Lottie had too much quiet depth to be happy with the man Angus had just described.

Angus took him on a tour of the ranch the next day. Lottie rode with them, close to Johnny's stirrup. She made quite a picture, with the sun on her shining hair.

They had been riding for an hour when she said, "What do you think of the country, Johnny?"

"I like it fine," he replied. "I suppose you mean how do I think of it as cattle country. As to that, I couldn't say."

She flashed him a smile. "You'll learn, Johnny. That is, if you stay long enough."

He reddened a little. Angus grinned at that. "Don't let her get your goat, son. As long as she knows she can, she'll keep riding you. Indigo Springs is just ahead, over that rise. You'll get a chance to see what all the fooferaw is about."

They pulled up at the summit of the rise. Bawling cattle were milling around what appeared to be a shallow waterhole about a hundred feet in diameter. The water looked brown and roiled. A few stunted willows grew near the seep.

"It doesn't look like much for men to fight over, does it, son?" Angus grunted. "It looks as if Long S stock are being watered down there."

"Long S stock," Lottie said, "with Long S men herding them. And isn't that Cliff standing by the seep?"

"Yeah, with Bull Munson," Angus remarked. "Well, this should be interesting."

He gigged his horse down the slope, followed by Johnny and Lottie. They pulled up by the seep.

Angus swung from his horse, saying, "Howdy, Cliff."

Cliff Sunderson grinned and lifted a lazy hand in greeting. Bull Munson's battered face bore a fixed scowl; he said nothing. Sunderson was taller than his foreman, not as thick-bodied, but cat-flanked and with a powerful sweep of shoulders.

His face was good-natured, handsome, and open looking, but with a latent shrewdness Johnny did not miss. Whether it was fun or a fight in the offing, Cliff Sunderson was not a man who would be caught napping.

Cliff pushed his Stetson back from his sweat-matted flaxen hair, gave Lottie an admiring nod, and looked at Johnny, then at Angus. He said pleasantly, "New man, oldtimer?"

Angus bridled at little under this casual taunting reference to his years, and said coldly, "Yeah. His name's Johnny Green."

Cliff gave Johnny a tolerant once over. "And what's your specialty, friend—rope, guns, or fists?"

"Have you looked at your big bad foreman's face lately, sonny?" Angus inquired gently.

A brief wicked slanting of Cliff's eyes was the only sign of his irritation. He eyed Munson for a moment, and the bull-like foreman flushed under his swarthy skin. Cliff spoke, biting each word off.

"Do you mean to say that this undersized kid did that to you?"

"I was drunk," Munson muttered.

"Drunk with his own meanness," Angus said with satisfaction. "Don't let Johnny Green's size fool you, Cliff. So you're still watering here."

Cliff's eyebrows lifted a quarter inch. "Why, yes. I told you I would. I mean to continue doing so."

Angus gave an impatient jerk of his head. "There's enough good water for your stock on the other side of your ranch. The rest of us can't reach it without driving across your land."

Cliff shook his head. "And you'd better never try it, Horne."

"We don't intend to. But I'm asking you straight, why hog this water that we need, when the other is available to you? You'd only have to push your cattle a little farther to reach it."

CLIFF rubbed a finger across the bridge of his long nose, nodding thoughtfully. "That's a straight question, and deserves a straight answer. So I'll tell you." His cheerful gaze became diamond hard. "I'm expanding. I'll need all the water I can get, and I want it understood now that I claim the right to this spring. Besides, not you or any of these other hardscrabble hangers on can tell a Sunderson where he will or won't water. And if you think you can, just try it now."

That was the overriding arrogance of the old-time cattle baron speaking. Angus glanced at the Long S herders, about a half-dozen men occupied with their work. They'd be no trouble.

There were only Cliff and Bull facing Angus, and only they wore guns. Johnny could see the anger boiling high in Angus, and knew that the older man was strongly tempted to have it out here. In fact, his hand dropped to his horn-butted .45.

Then Angus glanced back over his shoulder at Lottie and Johnny, remembering suddenly that they were in the line of fire. He sighed and shook his head regretfully.

Cliff had been aware that he was staring at the face of danger for the length of one hard-held breath: now he let the breath out and relaxed. But Bull Munson, dull-minded and imperceptive, seemed not to notice the falling off of tension; his thick hand brushed his holster.

Angus might have been forced to a showdown then, if it hadn't been for Lottie. Her hand snaked down to the saddle boot under her right leg and came up holding her carbine.

"We don't want trouble," she said sharply. "Don't you start it."

Bull rumbled a laugh. "Does she look like Dan'l Boone to you, Cliff?"

Angus said mildly, "Don't make a mistake. She can outshoot any man in your outfit."

Bull laughed again; Cliff didn't even smile. "Can you, Lottie?" he asked.

"Cass taught me," she said simply, not taking her cold gaze off Munson.

"Relax, Bull," Cliff said good-naturedly. "You too, honey."

His gaze strayed insolently from her face, down to the fullness that curved the flannel shirt. Johnny's hands clenched white knuckled on his reins. Cliff's gaze flicked suddenly to him.

"You do look sort of mean, kid," he remarked. He seemed to mull that over. "So you whipped Bull. You know, I did some boxing back East. I was champion at the university, as a matter of fact. I wonder how you'd fare outside of a barroom brawl. I bet you'd get cut to pieces in a scientific bout."

"I don't know," Johnny said softly. "But you can find out any time."

Cliff regarded him a speculative moment, then laughed suddenly and slapped his thigh. "Good! I've been afraid of getting rusty, and the boys at the ranch are a total loss as sparring partners, except for Bull. But he's an easy mark when he has to fight clean. Step down, kid. Let's go a bout."

"Here?" Angus barked.

"Why not?" Cliff grinned. "Your boy isn't scared, is he?"

For answer, Johnny Green swung to the ground. "No, Johnny," Lottie said softly, but he didn't look at her.

He pulled off his hat and handed it to Angus. Cliff unstrapped his gun and passed it and his own hat to Munson.

"We'll square away over here, back of the seep," Cliff said cheerfully. "I'll need room to lay you out. Marquis of Queensbury rules, eh? Or wouldn't you know about that?"

Strangely, those words struck an answering chord of familiarity in Johnny's mind. Queensbury. Eagerly, he tried to follow up that track of thought, and then found there was no time to think, for Cliff was moving after him.

Cliff's left was up; he jabbed with his right. Johnny backed cautiously away, circling. There was something familiar, too, about Cliff's stance. Yet Johnny was bewildered, and rashly he tried the same rushing tactics which had brought Munson down the day before.

He bored in at Cliff, and flung a punch high to Cliff's face with the speed of a striking

snake. To his surprise, Cliff blocked it easily. Then that poised right fist, waiting for just this, exploded full on Johnny's unguarded chin.

LIGHT and darkness burst as one in Johnny's brain, and he felt the ground tilt and rise and slam him in the face. Doggedly, shaking his head, he lifted himself on his hands. His head cleared and he looked around, seeing Lottie's white imploring face, which was asking him without words to quit now.

"No," he whispered to himself, and looked up at Cliff. The rancher's smile was a sneer, but there was admiration in it, too.

"That punch should have put you away for an hour," Cliff said. "But hell, you can't box." He began to turn away.

"Just a minute," Johnny said huskily, and Cliff paused, waiting.

Johnny came to his feet, slowly, to give himself time to gather his faculties and assess his situation. Keep away from him, he thought. He began to circle again, moving always away from Cliff, not pressing an offensive, just getting the feel of his opponent, warding off Cliff's light jabs.

Now, more and more, there was a sense of something remembered, something familiar about to this. It was beginning to become simple, this pushing away of Cliff's jabs. Annoyance flickered across Cliff's face; he was becoming impatient with this stalking of a moving figure which steadily evaded him.

He moved in abruptly, landing another hard right slam—but this time, though awkwardly, Johnny guarded his chin, deflecting the punch. The blow hit him in the chest, knocking him off balance. He let himself fall, but rolled instantly on his side and spun catlike to his feet, facing his antagonist again.

Cliff swore and went in after him. Johnny saw Cliff's breath coming harder, faster. Out of condition, he was already winded. His own breathing easy and controlled, Johnny sank into a crouch. It was an automatic reflex, purely without thought.

And now, easily and naturally, he countered Cliff's offensive with a flurry of jabs, yet backing away in a circle. Cliff began to pant and flounder in his follow ups; his blows lost timing. His foot slipped in the sand and he went down on one knee. For a moment he stayed there, hauling in hard-drawn breaths.

"Want to take the count, Mr. Sunderson?" Johnny asked lightly.

Cliff's reply was choked with fury. "No, damn you!"

He launched to his feet and forged in, windmilling punches. His scientific training was a thin facade; now he was fighting with a primal fury. He drove a looping overhand right to the middle of Johnny's face, but Johnny slipped easily under it, letting it graze his hair.

Cliff's own momentum carried Johnny inside his guard to the chance Johnny was watching for. He slammed lightning lefts and rights to Cliff's midsection. When Cliff doubled up, Johnny straightened him with an uppercut.

He moved back one step as Cliff's knees began to bend, drove in a straight right, and felt the cartilage of Cliff's nose crunch under his fist. Cliff plunged down like a falling tree, plowed on his face, and lay motionless with outflung arms.

Johnny had moved back to let him fall. Now, without a break in his fluid movement, he turned on his heel and walked straight for Munson, who backed off quickly. The Long S punchers had stopped working and were staring open mouthed.

Johnny gently lifted Cliff's hat from Bull Munson's lax hand and bent to fill it with tepid water from the hole. He carried the full-sloshing hat back to Cliff and poured the water over him slowly, letting it spray ludicrously off his head. Cliff groaned, stirred, maneuvered to a sitting position. Blood and dirt caked his face.

"If you want to know," Johnny said pleasantly, "it was I who hit you. Any time you want to give me Lesson Number Two, you just let me know, Mr. Sunderson."

He tossed the hat in Cliff's lap and walked back to his horse.

Angus said nothing; his face was grim. But for just a moment he settled one big hand on Johnny's shoulder and squeezed it hard. "Let's mount up," Angus said then, and they swung up to their saddles.

"Wait a minute."

It was Cliff's hoarse croak. He had swayed to his feet, and was stumbling drunkenly to-

ward them. When he reached Johnny Green's horse, he reached up one big raw-knuckled hand.

"You licked me fair," he said. "This is just to show there's no grudge." The words belied the cold hatred in his eyes. But Johnny silently shook hands.

Cliff stepped back, looking up at Angus Horne. "Do you want to end this waterhole feud without gunplay?"

The question was blunt enough, but Cliff was full of subterfuge, and Angus studied him warily, wondering what was behind his words. "Sure."

"I have a proposition. Your boy's quite a fighter. Would you give him odds against any man I could dig up?"

Angus permitted himself a brief frosty smile. "I reckon I would. Why?"

"Good. I'd like to arrange a fight between him and a man I'll select. If he wins, I'll forfeit all rights to this waterhole with a signed quitclaim. If my man wins, you forfeit."

"Do you have an ax to grind, Cliff?" Angus asked bluntly.

"Hell, no," Cliff said impatiently. "I'm making you a sporting proposition. Of course, if you're not sure of your boy—"

"I'm sure of him," Angus snapped. "It's you I have my doubts about. And I never did like risking a whole pot on a single throw."

CLIFF laughed. "Think I've got something up my sleeve, eh? Look here—we'll arrange the bout on neutral ground, with an impartial outsider as referee. All aboveboard and to the satisfaction of both parties. How does it sound, kid?" He nodded to Johnny.

Johnny shrugged. "It's for Angus to say. If he wants to accept, I'll meet your man."

Angus pursed his thin lips. "Who do you have in mind for your fighter?"

"I'll let you know later." Cliff smiled crookedly. "There are a lot of details to iron out—place, time, and so on. I'll get in touch with you."

"All right." Angus turned his horse abruptly and swung back toward Whippletree, with Johnny and Lottie falling in beside him.

"You don't sound too enthusiastic, Angus," Lottie said. Her tone was chiding, but worried sounding, too.

Angus grunted sarcastically. "Any proposition of Cliff's is likely to have more hidden teeth than a close-mouthed 'gater. Still, he's a born gambler and sportsman. If there's one thing he might take seriously, it's something on this order."

He reached out and slapped Johnny on the knee. "Thanks for the support, son. You aren't obliged to fight Cliff's man, you know."

"I think I am," Johnny said quietly. Angus was generous; it was like him to discount a debt. But a man had to pay his due.

Angus was nodding to himself now, as though confirming something. He eyed Johnny narrowly. "I had a hunch when I saw you lick Bull. After the way you just took Cliff apart, I'm sure of it. You're a trained fighter. It played a big part in your past. Maybe you ought to follow the clue up, instead of wasting time around here."

"Could be." Johnny shrugged. "Only I happen to like it here."

He felt strangely indifferent to this new knowledge of his forgotten past. Maybe it was part of what he'd been trying to leave behind when he'd gotten off the train in this arid, little-settled country. He felt strongly that there had been something he was trying to leave behind.

The week rolled by, and Johnny began to acquaint himself with ranch work, and to like it. He made up in interest and aptitude what he lacked in experience, and both Angus and Lottie complimented him on his progress. Meanwhile, as the days passed, there was no word from Cliff. That worried Angus; he was sure now that Cliff was up to something.

On Saturday night, Johnny came in tired and dirty from a day of repairing fence. He washed up and wolfed supper, Angus watching him approvingly.

"You've been working like a horse this last week, son," he said, his frosty eyes holding a latent twinkle. "You deserve to relax a little." He glanced at Lottie, who was beginning to clear the table. "Lot, there's a dance in town tonight, isn't there?"

Lottie stacked the dishes with a clatter, pushed a strand of hair back, and said carefully, "Now, how would I know?"

Angus pulled out his pipe and began to fill it. He chuckled. "You know, all right. You bought some dress goods when we went to town the other day, and you've been sewing every night—and hoping."

A faint flush rose in her face as she carried the cleared things to the dishpan. Johnny watched the movement of her trim back, then looked guiltily down at the red-and-white checked oilcloth, knowing his face was redder than even his deep sunburn warranted.

Angus chewed his pipestem. "Fighters make good dancers, I've heard. They're nimble on their feet." He winked at Johnny.

Johnny fidgeted for a while in his chair, then got up and walked over to stand by Lottie. "I'll dry the dishes for you," he offered roughly.

"Thanks." Color was high in her cheeks.

"Lottie," he got out in a rush, "do you want to go to that dance?"

Her voice was cool. "You needn't do me any favors, Johnny."

"Well, you'd sort of be doing me the favor."

"And that's sort of gallant." She bit her lip, but couldn't hold back her smile now. "Oh, Johnny, of course I'll go with you! Angus, don't you have a suit? And do you think it would fit Johnny?"

"I reckon," Angus said, nodding his gray-thatched head and puffing quickly on the pipe, the only sign of his pleasure. "I never wore it much, and I don't fill it out any more. I was about Johnny's size when I was younger. It should be a good fit."

The suit was well-tailored black broadcloth of rather old-fashioned cut. Johnny stood stiffly in it, uncomfortably pacing the kitchen while Lottie dressed in her little curtained-off alcove.

"You look fine, son," Angus reassured him. "Relax."

LOTTIE swept from her alcove, whirling for their inspection. The checked gingham clung to her rounded upper body, flared from her hips into a full skirt. She was surprisingly slender and graceful in feminine attire; she'd fussed with her hair, and there was an excited sparkle in her eyes.

"It makes me wish I were young again," Angus said. "You're a fine-looking couple. Now go along; I have the wagon hitched up outside."

"Aren't you coming?" Lottie demanded.

"Such pleasures are long past for me," Angus said regretfully. "And I'll be too strongly reminded of it, sitting in the stagline shooting the guff with aging cronies. You two have a good time."

The wagon rolled briskly through a sage-pungent night, neither the boy nor the girl saying much. There was a beginning wonder to this for them both, though possibly more for Johnny, who was discovering life all over. The tacit confidence of Angus, entrusting a near-stranger with Lottie for the evening, and having her here beside him, was the fulfillment of a promise he'd felt from his first recollections of this country.

The crowded community hall of Morene was the nucleus for young and old tonight. Johnny discovered that he knew how to dance well once he got the hang of the steps, as Angus had predicted, and Lottie showed her pleasure. Between sets she introduced him to many people, and he tried desperately to keep track of names and faces. Finally in the whirl of dance, noise, laughter, and the kaleidoscopic blur of faces, he gave up.

Everyone knew everyone else, everyone was out for a good time, and nobody stood on formality. Lottie was whirled away for a varsiviona with a grinning young cowboy, and Johnny lost track of her for most of the evening.

He danced with two buxom settlers' daughters, and then a group of young men drew him aside with the slyly whispered remark that one of them had a jug cached outside.

They stood in the patio back of the hall, and the jug was brought out. Johnny took his pull when it was passed, and, with the fiery corn liquor burning his gullet, knew finally and for good that he was accepted.

There was the bragging talk, the drink-blurred young men's voices lifted in song, the slapping of calloused hands on brawny shoulders, and the telling each other what fine fellows they were. Then the jug was empty, and there was the almost stealthy straggling back into the noise and brightness of the hall to face, with sheepish grins, the teasing or scolding of sweethearts and wives.

Lottie was sitting on the sidelines, chatting with another girl. When Johnny came, shuffling his feet, his face red with drink and shame, she gave him a chiding look because that was what he expected; but then she couldn't help laughing.

A heavy hand fell on Johnny's shoulder. Cliff Sunderson stood there, tawny haired, handsome, and affable looking, in a well-cut suit. He indicated the portly white-mustached man at his side. "Kid, this is the J. P., Judge Hasker. He'll referee your fight."

Johnny shook hands with the judge, wondering if the man was to be trusted. His suspicion was swiftly dispelled when the judge nodded to Lottie, courteously greeting her by name, and Lottie's reply was warm. Judge Hasker must be solid and respectable, and if Lottie accepted him as referee, so would Angus. If Angus was right and Cliff had an ace in the hole, it must be that Cliff was mighty certain of his fighter, Johnny decided.

"Understand, young man," the judge said to Johnny, "I will name the time and place at which the bout will ensue; and my judgment will be final and unquestionable. If, for any reason, one side should renege on the agreement, or should choose to back out prior to the fight, that side will forfeit the stakes—that is, the right to water at Indigo Springs—to the other party.

"Also, Mr. Sunderson has already named his fighter, and I understand that you will represent Angus Horne. This choice of antagonists must be considered final; there will be no changes. Mr. Sunderson suggested these conditions, and I find them sound. Will you accept the terms?"

Johnny hesitated. "I can't speak for Angus, sir."

The judge smiled for the first time. "You're a young man of scruple. I meant, however, to receive only your own approval. I will speak to Angus personally."

Lottie spoke up. "That won't be necessary, Judge Hasker," she said clearly. "I know Angus would agree; since you are handling things. I'm sure he'll let Johnny speak for him."

She looked at Johnny as she spoke, and he saw the full measure of her confidence in him. It was a good feeling.

"Very well, my dear," the judge said. "It will be as you say. And what do you say, young man?"

WITHOUT hesitation now, Johnny agreed. Cliff slapped him heartily on the arm. "Fine, kid. Now that's settled, maybe you'd like to meet the man you'll fight. He came in the train a couple of hours ago."

Lottie's eyes sparkled. "So you imported a fighter, a professional prize-ring killer, I've no doubt! We might have expected something of the sort from you!"

"Temper, Lottie girl," Cliff said, bathing her in a bland smile. "I don't recall anything that stipulated against my bringing in a man from outside. Well, kid, do you want to meet him?"

Johnny nodded, and he, Cliff, and the judge headed for the entrance. "That's him, leaning against the doorjamb," Cliff said, as they threaded their way among the dancing couples.

The man indicated was a pale city fellow in a checked flashy suit. He was a bull-chested man of Johnny's height, but older and much heavier. His nose was flattened gristle, his ears twisted cauliflowers. He was surveying the dancing festivities with bored and cynical eyes.

Johnny felt a sharp pang of recognition, brief and tantalizing.

They reached the man, and Cliff performed the introductions. "Buck, meet Johnny Green, the kid you'll slaughter. Kid, this is Buck Kendricks, from Frisco." Cliff grinned, not pleasantly. "They call Buck 'Killer' Kendricks. I saw him fight in Frisco last year, watched him tear some young punk to pieces. So I got in touch with him and paid his fare to Arizona."

Taking his time, to show his contempt, Kendricks turned his battered face toward Johnny. His jaundiced eyes froze suddenly, then widened with surprise and something close to fear.

The pug turned furiously on Cliff with a yellow-toothed snarl. "Do you want me to fight *him?*"

Cliff's eyes narrowed in surprise, then hardened. "What did you expect, a five-year-old?"

"But you told me the kid I'd fight was named Green! That's why I took your offer. I never heard of a pug named Green; I figured

this kid was a hick slugger, a pushover. But him! Don't you know who he is?" Without waiting for an answer, Kendricks added, "The hell with it! The deal's off, Sunderson. If you think I'll fight him, you're crazy."

"Now just hold on," Cliff said in a softly outraged tone. "If you think I paid out good money for a half-dozen telegrams, more money for contacts to get hold of you, plus the expense to bring you here—and think you can back out now—"

"Here's my traveling money." Kendricks dug out a thick wallet, stripped off some bills, and rammed them in Cliff's breast pocket. "As for the rest of the dough, that's your tough luck. I'm taking the next train out."

He spun on his heel and stamped from the hall with Cliff at his heels, saying furiously, "Now damn you, Kendricks, listen to me!"

The judge turned with puzzled impatience to Johnny. "What does this mean, sir?"

"Excuse me," Johnny said dazedly, and turned to maneuver back through the whirling couples toward Lottie. The movements of the dancers, the noise, only added to the swimming confusion in his mind. He had nearly reached Lottie before the full impact of what had happened burst across his mind. Why, he thought, that man knew me!

He pushed roughly back through the dancers, muttering "Sorry. Excuse me." He ran past the startled judge and burst onto the boardwalk, flinging glances up and down the street. There was no sign of Cliff or Kendricks. I've got to find him, he thought desperately.

He spent the next half hour rushing in and out of a dozen saloons and the hotel and railroad station before coming to a dismal acceptance of the fact that. Kendricks, the link with his lost past, had disappeared, swallowed by the oppressive Arizona night.

Feeling drained and empty, he returned to the hall, reasoning that he was upset over nothing; Cliff had probably argued Kendricks into staying and going through with the fight, and had taken him out to Long S for his stay.

JUDGE HASKER met Johnny with red-faced anger. "What the devil are you and Sunderson trying to bring off?" he demanded.

Johnny was trying to explain his personal problem to the judge when Lottie, understanding that something was wrong, came over and calmly told Hasker about Johnny's dilemma.

"I see," Hasker said, not angry now so much as puzzled. "And this man Kendricks knew you before?"

"It seems that way," Johnny said tiredly. Then he started in surprise as Cliff Sunderson re-entered the hall. He moved quickly to Cliff and grabbed him by the lapels. "Where's Kendricks?"

"He's gone," Cliff said sourly. "Judge, about the fight—"

"Where?" Johnny cut in. "Gone where?"

Cliff jerked free, angrily. "How the hell should I know? He's gone, that's all! Forget him." He turned to Hasker again.

"Well, Cliff," the Judge said coldly, "what is there to say? If your man has run out, the terms of the agreement are broken—the terms you yourself offered, I might add."

"You mean I lose the stake?"

"If you mean to abide by your given word," Judge Hasker retorted. "The entire agreement was verbal, of course, though Miss Horne and I witnessed it. Then," he added icily, "I detest a cheat, Cliff. If you should be inclined to renege, I might be inclined to prosecute you—and believe me, boy, I'll snare you in every technicality I know."

"Nobody said anything about cheating," Cliff muttered sullenly. But his fists were closing and unclosing with repressed fury.

"Then," the judge pressed quickly, "be in my office tomorrow morning. And, Miss Horne, please, tell Angus to be there. Mr. Sunderson has a paper to sign."

Cliff hesitated for a moment, his face dark with a flood of violence, but he held it in. He pivoted on his heel and left the hall. Hasker tipped his hat to Lottie, clamped it back on his sparse white hair, and followed Cliff.

Lottie turned to Johnny, releasing her held breath. "Well, doesn't this call for a celebration?"

"Yes, ma'am. And may I have the next dance?"

Sometime after midnight, the festivities broke up and folks began straggling to buggies and horses, calling good-byes. Johnny gave Lottie a hand up to the buckboard, took his

seat beside her, and took up the reins, driving the wagon down the street, then onto the moon-washed plain. Lottie eased off the flimsy slippers she'd worn, wincing.

"Ouch," she said.

"It was quite an evening," Johnny said.

"Not all ranchhands dance as well as you," she said ruefully, massaging her sore feet.

Johnny grinned and lifted the horses into a brisk trot.

"Not so fast," Lottie protested. "It's a pleasant night; let's enjoy it."

Soon, too soon, they reached the cottonwood-bordered lane that branched off the road into the ranchyard. "Pull up, Johnny," she said. "Here, under the trees. I want to talk."

He pulled up the horses and sat in silence, waiting.

"It should be said," Lottie murmured, pleating a fold of her skirt between her fingers, "and I have a feeling you'll never say it. So I will. What about us, Johnny?"

She knew, then. He wondered how long he'd been wearing his feelings for her on his face. But he hadn't been sure of himself in anything as important as this, when he was so unsure of his own life and its direction. And he had hoped she would respond, but without any real belief that she would.

"Let me say it," he said. "I guess I can, now. I love you, Lottie. I have from the first day."

Her skirt whispered as she shifted to face him directly. "Then what are you waiting for?"

Her voice was a tender sound, mingling with the hammering of blood against his temples and the rainy murmur of the cottonwood leaves. Her mouth joined his, warm and pliant, the slim young body arching up to him with the hard pull of his hands.

They moved apart breathlessly. There was hurt in Lottie's voice. "I'm not sure I liked that, Johnny."

"I'm sorry," he said stiffly.

"Oh, Johnny! It wasn't you. It was your manner, as though you were angry, as though you were trying to hurt something."

"I wasn't trying to hurt you," he said miserably, "just myself. It's no good, Lottie. There's nothing I can give you, not even a name."

"Nothing," she said, "except yourself. I'm not asking for anything else. But that I think I insist on. Is it too much?"

"No. But what I'm saying is that I can't give you everything, not with this damned blank in my mind."

SHE said softly, persuasively, "But you haven't given yourself time. Dr. Lane said it would be slow. It's been only a week. Wait, Johnny. You can wait, and I'm willing to."

He searched her dimly-seen face. "And you're not afraid, Lottie, of who, or what, Johnny Green might have been before?"

"I'll never be afraid of you." She reached over to kiss him lightly.

"Listen," Johnny said quietly.

She straightened, alert to the night sounds, then turned a look of puzzled wonder to him. "I heard a rider," she said. "He seems to be coming toward the ranch from another direction."

"Yeah," Johnny said.

They listened for another straining moment. Suddenly there was a rifle shot, high and sharp, not from the house but close by it. Then there was the sound of a hard-driven horse vanishing in the night.

"Let's get up there!" Johnny said.

He shouted at the horses, careening the wagon sharply up the lane. In a minute the lights of the house shone among the trees. Lottie jumped from the high seat, tearing her skirt in her haste, at the wagon hauled to a stop. She ran toward the house. Johnny quieted the horses before he vaulted down and followed her, feeling a sudden numbing fear as he remembered Angus here alone.

They found Angus face down on the floor, a toppled chair beside him. He'd been sitting at the table when the shot had spun him backward. Blood had pooled on his back and run down his side to stain the floor. Lottie fell to her knees by him, sobbing. "Oh, Johnny, he's—"

At that instant, Angue groaned. His lank body twitched.

"He's not dead," Johnny said, "yet."

He moved to the broken side window, his boots crunching on the shattered glass littering the floor. The rifleman had station himself well beyond the house and picked an easy

target through the lighted window. He turned to the girl.

"Can you take care of him till I get Doc Lane?"

"Yes." Her tear-streaked face had gained a hard composure. "It was Cliff," she said bitterly.

Johnny made that churning buggy ride to town and back in record time. He and the stocky doctor tramped into the house and found that Lottie had made Angus as comfortable as she could without moving him. She'd stoked the stove, too, and had a kettle of water boiling briskly.

"Good girl," Doc said, giving her a quick hard glance of approval. He made a cursory examination, then said to Johnny, "Let's get him up on the bed. I can work better there."

Gently they lifted Angus to his cot, and then Doc set about his work in silence, except for an occasional quick-snapped order. He had to probe for the bullet, which was dangerously near the right lung. The quick gray hours of pre-dawn had laid spectral fingers over the land when Doc finished dressing and binding the wound and turned to tell them that Angus would live.

With a choked sob, Lottie buried her face in Johnny's shoulder. He held her for a moment, then told her, "Get some sleep."

"I'll watch Angus, Johnny. You and the doctor sleep."

Johnny said flatly, "I can go without sleep. I'll sit up, and I'll wake you, Doc, if there's any need."

Doc exhaustedly agreed and sought Johnny's cot, while Lottie retired to her alcove. Johnny sat by Angus's bedside through the long dragging hours of night. Angus was only slightly restless. He had revived very briefly, but he was breathing steadily in normal sleep now, and that was good.

Lottie was up early, coming from her alcove in her rough familiar work garb. She stood for a moment, silently watching Johnny, who had already changed his clothes and was now carefuly folding Angus's suit and replacing it in the commode behind his cot. There was a hard decision in Johnny's manner that she did not miss.

"What are you thinking of?"

"I'm riding out to Indigo Springs," Johnny said curtly. "I may be wrong, but I don't figure Mr. Sunderson will waste any time now."

"I'm going with you," she said instantly. "They'll have guns, Johnny. And you've never even held a gun as far as you know. You'll need me, and you know it."

He let out his breath. "Yeah," he said reluctantly.

JOHNNY woke the doctor, apologized for keeping him away from other business, but asked if he could watch Angus for awhile. They'd be back as soon as possible. Doc Lane replied waspishly that he hadn't any intention of leaving till he was sure Angus was past the critical stage.

Johnny and Lottie saddled up and rode out with few words; their concern for Angus and the knowledge of the danger they might meet at the Springs, along with the iron certainty that it must be faced, held them mute.

They topped the rise above the watering place and saw a stir of activity in the dawn light. Men were unloading cedar posts from a wagon. Bull Munson was supervising the work, while Cliff Sunderson stood by watching.

Lottie said softly, "They're going to fence off the spring."

"No," Johnny said tonelessly, "I don't think they are."

He nudged his horse down the slope, hearing Lottie keeping pace behind him. Bull Munson saw them first and grunted a warning to Cliff, who set his hands on his hips and waited with a hard grin. One by one, the men left off work and stood awkwardly by, as though ashamed of what they were doing.

Johnny saddled his horse around by Cliff. "I see that the vultures are gathering," he said bluntly.

Without hurry, Cliff began shaping a cigarette. "When I heard about old Angus's mishap, and knew he wouldn't be needing this water after all, I just didn't see any sense in letting it stand unused."

"How did you hear about Angus?"

Cliff shrugged. "Maybe Doc dropped by a while ago and mentioned it."

"Doc's still with Angus," Lottie breathed in a trembling voice. "You devil, Cliff Sunderson! It wasn't enough to shoot him. Now you mean to cheat on an honorable debt."

"Hell," Cliffe said imperturbably, cupping his hands to light his cigarette against a gust of wind. "I made the bet with Angus, not you, honey, or the kid here. I owed Angus, not you. And it doesn't look much as if Angus will be collecting.."

"So that was your logic when you had him shot," she cried.

"Prove it."

"We won't have to. It didn't work, Cliff—because Angus is still alive."

"Don't waste words, Lottie." Johnny cut her off in a voice like steel. "Just get out your rifle and hold it on these others."

As he finished speaking, Johnny left the saddle in one lithe motion, lifting his feet from the stirrups and diving straight at Cliff from horseback. He hit the rancher with an impact that took Cliff by complete surprise and drove him backward, the wind gushing from his lungs as Johnny's weight smashed him to the ground.

He rolled away from Cliff and came to his feet, his face flushed with a cold, killing savagery. The movement brought his back to Munson and the others, but he didn't even look their way. He gave Lottie one flicking glance, and saw her rifle come out of its scabbard and train unwaveringly on the startled Long S men.

Johnny Green's mind held room for one thought only—to beat Cliff Sunderson to within an inch of his life. Circumstantial evidence and the rancher's money might save him in the courts. But it would not save him now from a beating he deserved.

Johnny watched Cliff gasp for breath, get up on one knee, then labor to his feet. Seeing Cliff's face, Johnny knew there would be no holds barred in this fight. But that was how he wanted it. In his rage, Cliff forgot his science.

Johnny ducked under the rancher, a first wild swing, and pistoned both fists to Cliff's soft midsection, working to wear him down. When Cliff tried to protect his body, Johnny shifted the blows to his face.

A looping right hurt Cliff, and as flinched back, hooking a bootheel in a half-dug postthole. He fell on his back in the mud of the seep, the water spraying out with the smack of his fall, and rolling back to drench him.

Again, painfully, stubbornly, Cliff maneuvered to his feet. His broken nose had started to bleed. His right eye was beginning to close. Muddy water streamed from his soaked clothes as he slogged out of the seep.

He turned his head till his eye fell on a shovel rammed into the ground, left by one of his men who had moved back safely beyond the perimeter of battle. Cliff yanked up the shovel and swung it to striking position as he charged after Johnny.

The rifle bellowed in the clear morning; the shovel was torn from Cliff's hands and flung yards away. It fell in the sand by two Long S punchers, but they made no move to retrieve it. They were careful to make no move at all. The sunlight glanced eloquently off the long silvered streak on the rusty blade. Lottie coolly shifted the rifle to bear on Cliff's broad chest.

"The next one," she said clearly, "won't be aimed at what you're holding."

CLIFF made a snarling sound and lunged at Johnny, hoping to bear the smaller man down by weight and surprise. Johnny danced away, slashing again and again at Cliff's face until he saw the torpid drag of exhaustion in Cliff's movements, and knew the fight was won.

He stepped in and brought up a left hook that traveled no more than ten inches. Cliff went down on his back; his leg flexed. It straightened, but otherwise he did not move again. Breath bubbled through his nose.

Johnny looked up sharply as a horseman started down the rise beyond, a stocky white-haired man who looked born to the saddle. "It's Jim Baylor, Johnny," Lottie said, her voice shaky now that it was over, "the town marshal at Morene."

Baylor pulled up his dancing horse, his agate-hard eyes falling to the unconscious man, then lifting to Johnny. "Looks as if you beat me to him, young feller." He explained, "A dead man was found in the alley by the town hall about an hour ago. He was a stranger, and he'd been dead for hours. No one knew him till Judge Hasker identified him as the fighter from Frisco that Cliff brought in. It looked as if his head was caved in with the barrel of a .45."

Cliff was sitting up now, staring from glazed eyes at the marshal, listening. "What's that got to do with me?" he asked.

"The judge says you were the last one to be seen with Kendricks," said Baylor. "He says you trailed him out of the hall last night, mad as blazes because Kendricks refused to go through with an arranged fight between him and Angus Horne's man. The judge figured you might have pulled Kendricks into the alley to argue with him, then lost your temper when you found you couldn't talk him around, and hit him with your gun.

"You didn't know the blow killed him, so you let him lay. That sounds reasonable to me, Sunderson. If a jury thinks so too, you're facing a manslaughter charge." He pulled his Colt and coked it. "Get on your horse, Cliff."

Cliff rose and trudged, muddy and beaten, to his horse, after sending a single darting glance of hate at Johnny.

Bull Munson growled suddenly to Johnny, "You did this to Cliff! If it weren't for you—"

Munson's gorilla-like arm twitched down; he jerked out his gun and fired. Johnny felt the bursting flare of pain in his head, felt himself falling, and heard Lottie scream. The marshal cursed as he spurred his horse around toward Munson. Then sight and sound ribboned off, pinwheeling into blackness.

Much later at the ranch, Doc finished bandaging Johnny's head. "It's just a crease," the medico said as he packed his bag. "That thick skull of yours wasn't damaged—as usual."

Johnny gingerly felt the bandage with one hand. Lottie stood by his chair, a hand resting on his shoulder. Angus spoke from his cot, anxiously.

"No ill effects, son?"

"You can judge that," Johnny said with a wry smile, "when I tell you this. I didn't mention it before, but my memory's returned." Lottie grasped, Doc jerked in surprise, and Angus whistled. "Was it Munson's bullet?"

"I guess so. Anyway, I can remember everything—who I am, why I came to Arizona. I've been trying to get it sorted out."

Angus remarked, for Doc's benefit, "I said all along that we should have lambasted you in the first place. It's the quickest cure."

"Be quiet, Angus," Lottie said urgently. "Let Johnny talk."

Johnny told it tersely, swiftly, because he knew she had waited to hear this. First he gave his real name, Bill Loesser. He had grown up in a San Francisco slum, he told them. His father had died years ago, and his mother had eked out a living as a washerwoman. When Johnny was eighteen, her health had broken under overwork and the dank fog-drenched air of Frisco. The doctor had said her only hope was a dry climate; Arizona would be best.

Johnny had quite his mill job and had set about to get the necessary money to move her here in the fastest way possible—in the prize ring. He had hated doing it, but his natural strength and reflexes were those of a fighter, and he rose quickly from obscrity. Meanwhile, he read up on Arizona, burrowing out every scrap of information on his future homeland.

He'd had almost enough money, when his mother died quietly in her sleep. That had been two years ago. Angry against society, he had continued to fight.

"No wonder Kendricks was afraid of you," Lottie breathed.

Johnny continued. He had never forgotten Arizona, and when the sorrow of his mother's death had blunted enough for him to take a long look at himself, he'd decided to leave the sordid fight game for good.

He'd gotten off in Morene with the intention of hiring a horse and riding to look over the country which had become so close and familiar through his reading. At the corral, Munson and the others had pulled their trick, He was battered senseless when the horse threw him, and his past was wiped from his mind.

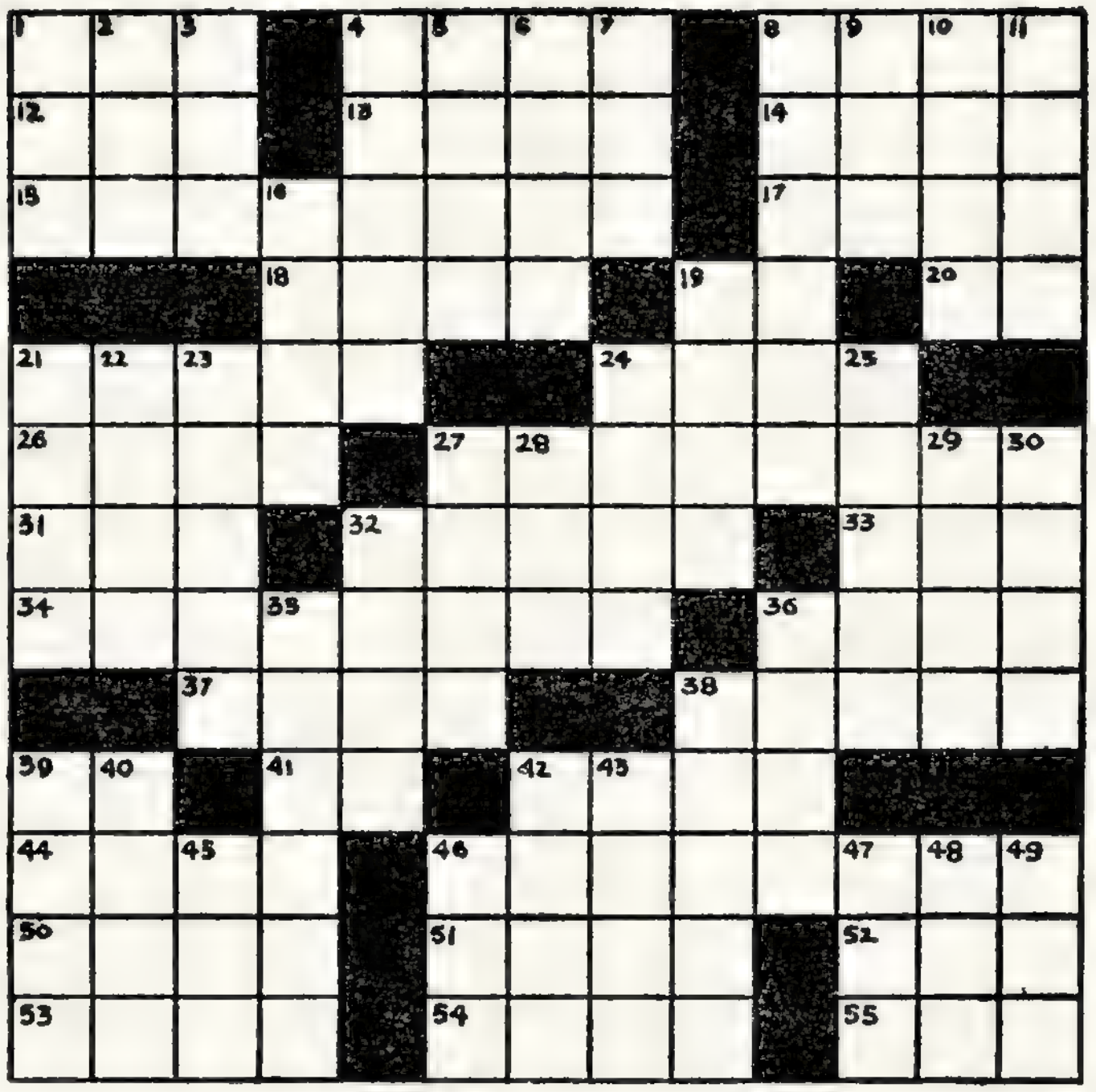
Now he looked at Angus and Lottie with a wry smile. "You can see it wasn't really much of a loss."

"I reckon," Angus said gently. He reached out one corded hand to grasp the young man's arm. "You can forget it all over again, boy. Johnny Green's our man. He's yours, too."

Johnny feit Lottie's hand move on his shoulder, and he looked up, meeting her radiant smile. Then her lips bent to his, saying gently, "Welcome home, Johnny."

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE

The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

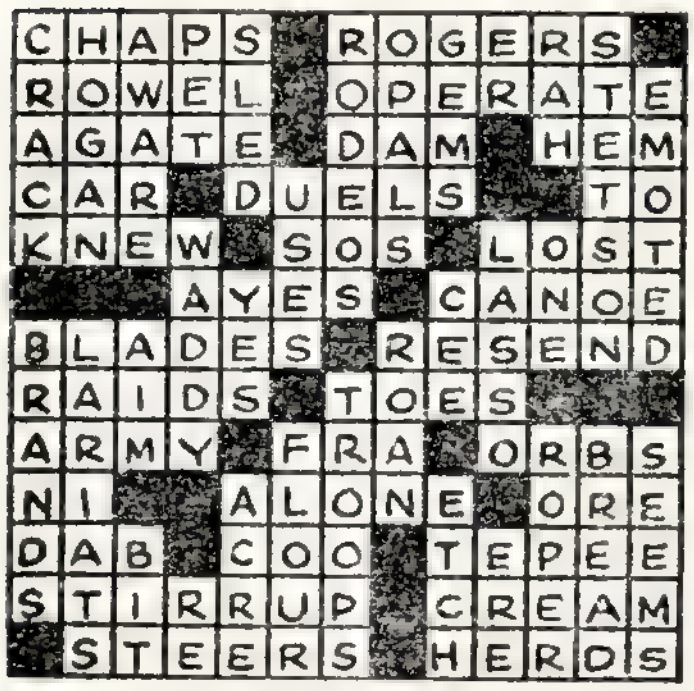


ACROSS

1 Not old
4 Canned food fish
8 Maverick
12 Miss Gardner, actress
13 Spring flower
14 Region
15 Without a saddle
17 Close by
18 Capable
19 Trinity Term (abbr.)
20 Negative reply
21 Cowboy boot attachments
24 Western product
26 Becomes sunburnt
27 Places for a horseman's feet
31 Likely
32 To frighten suddenly
33 Cow's sound
34 Rodeo spectator on à fence
36 Western plateau
37 To praise
38 Horseman
39 Mom
41 Street (abbr.)
42 Clock face
44 — 'n' Andy
46 Stealing cattle
50 To do again
51 Unemployed
52 Hot beverage
53 Finishes
54 Buzzing insects
55 Pigpen

DOWN

1 To arrest
2 Miss Gabor
3 Fight between nations
4 1955 Rodeo Champ
5 Russian mountain range
6 Agreeable
7 To inquire
8 Horse's gait
9 Have being
10 To incline against
11 Card game
16 Hearing organs
19 Period in office
21 Lone — State
22 Mama's spouse
23 Up to the time when
24 Robin or eagle
25 Emitted fumes
27 Slipped
28 Sticky black stuff
29 To sit for a picture
30 To fly aloft
32 To border on
35 Cowboy ropes
36 Grinding machine
38 Charges
39 Colt's mother
40 Prayer ending
42 Would-be cowboy
43 Small island
45 Peculiar
46 Curved bone
47 The thing's
48 Tennis-court divider
49 Merry



Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

1500P

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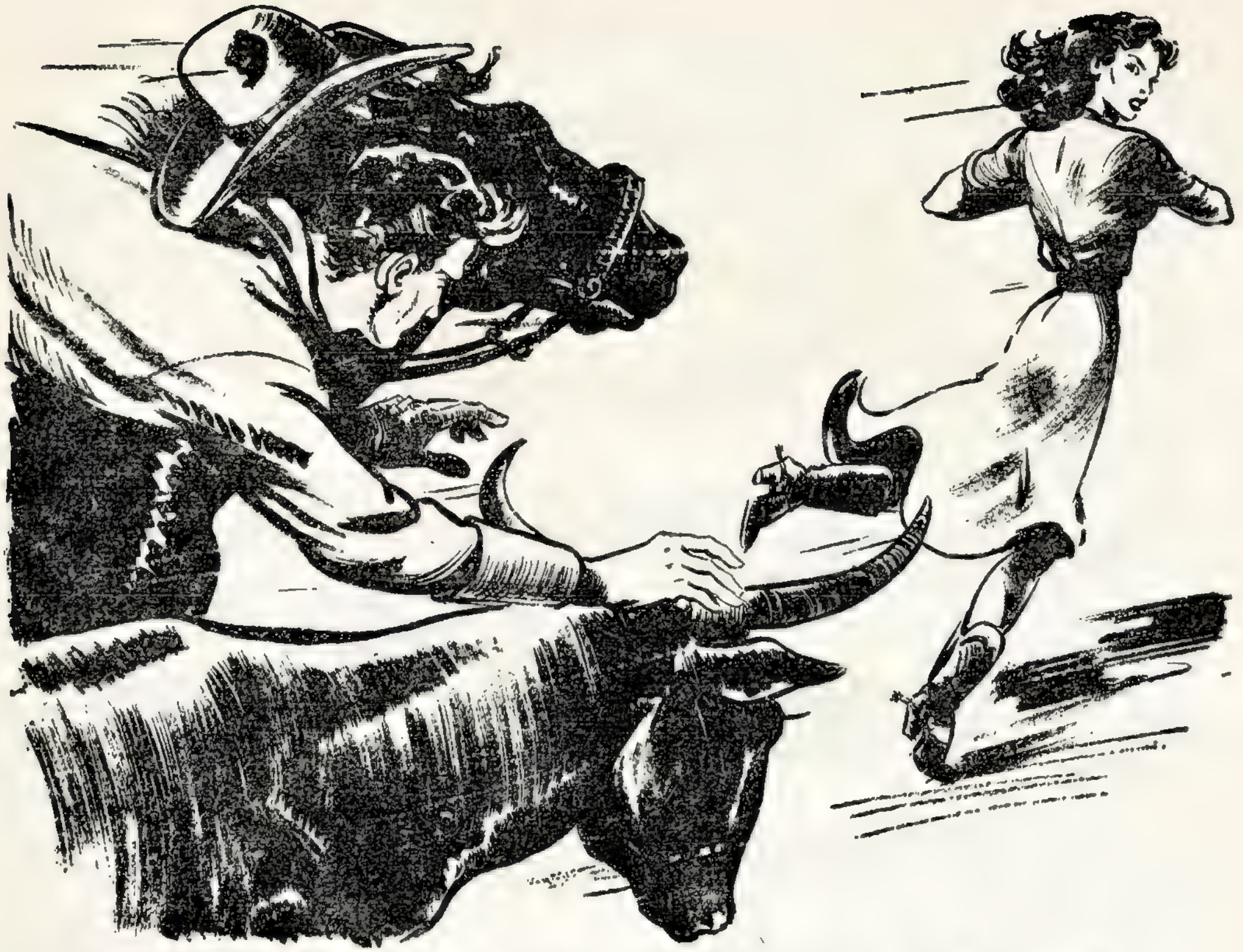

MISSION TO BLACK HORSE

By ART KERCHEVAL

SHERIFF BURT SHOTWELL slid from his roan horse, while his posse also got down from their saddles. They had the two men bottled up here in this remote canyon of the Buscadero Mountains. Slipping from rock to rock, the posse kept up their steady fire at the boulder nest not far below them. The fugitives sent back a hot answer, their bullets whizzing close to the lawmen.

Thorp Wallis, deputy sheriff, was crouched beside Shotwell. He said, "Any way they look at it, Burt, their number is up. If we don't cut them to shreds, a gallows will take care of their necks."

Shotwell nodded, squirming at the grisly thought. "Hanging," he said, "is harsh treat-

THERE WAS ONE THING about his job that the sheriff hated . . . the killing, and the anger against him that always followed

ment for just making off with a few cows. But I'll do my job. Braden and his pal will get the full dose, if they give themselves up."

"Maybe they're brave," Wallis offered. "Maybe they prefer lead to hemp."

Shotwell eased nearer. The local side of the two-bit rustling, he thought, ought to end with the finish of this pair. A week ago, Cartwheel Ranch had been raided. Last night, Seven Dot suffered losses. Ranchers and riders from both outfits were in his posse.

For months Braden and his partner had been hazing off local stock, bunching them in a natural corral in the hills. The location was outside of Shotwell's jurisdiction. There an outside gang paid off and took over.

As they narrowed their trap, the lawmen increased their fire. Suddenly, only one gun seemed to be opposing them from the boulders. Shotwell guessed that one of their slugs had knocked the other man out of the fight.

He concentrated his aim at the spot where that lone gun was blazing. Then he holstered, the better to get handholds on the slippery slant, keeping a big rock between him and the single foe. He was working along a course that would bring him above the rustler.

While his gun was silent, the weapons of his men maintained a shaking roar. They, too, were maneuvering to closer positions. Here and there the firing ceased, when a posseman had difficulty with the terrain. But slowly they completed their encirclement of the thief.

Then the abrupt sound of galloping hoofs broke into the thunder of gunfire. "He's getting away." The cry came from Hiram Swift, whose Tincup outfit had recently lost twenty head. "Damn it, how is it possible?"

But it was happening. Even while he was sending his lead crashing after the rider, Shotwell got the whole picture. The remaining fugitive had had his horse ready just beyond the boulder nest. In his last desperate try for freedom, he was rocketing over rough going that no calmer man would even attempt. Shotwell spent his last bullet as the rider whirled out of sight around the bend.

"He'll have to take the ledge trail out of the canyon," Wallis snapped. "But with his fool luck, he'll probably make it."

"Do we ride after him, Burt?" a Cartwheel cowboy asked.

"No," Shotwell said, emphatically. "Before we could get back to our horses, he'd be long gone from the canyon. And I don't want men and horses toppling off rims while chasing him. If he doesn't make it, he won't be bothering your beef any more. If he squeezes through, we'll let him have the laugh this time. One of these days his luck will run out. We'll head for that rock nest and see if we've downed Gus Braden."

They worked toward the boulders, where the quietness was ominous. The man might still be alive and waiting to dust off as many of the posse as he could. Shotwell kept advancing horizontally along the slant until he had a full view of the man's position.

He saw a sprawled shape, with his fallen gun just out of reach. The man was probably dead; at least he had been put out of commission. Shotwell was first to reach him. He turned the body face up. The eyes were fixed and lifeless.

"Why, it's Sam Waggoner!" he exclaimed.

"So it is." Hiram Swift nodded. "Who'd have thought Waggoner would turn thief? He kept pretty much to himself, and he wasn't much shucks at making a go of that Black Horse Ranch of his, but he seemed too simple to be a crook."

"I guess that's the answer." Wallis scratched his head. "That run-down spread of his wouldn't support him and his wife, so he tried grabbing the easy money. And he learned the hard way."

"That's right," Swift said. "He's leaving a widow behind—Elsie's her name, I think. She isn't the town-going kind, either. She stays cooped up on Black Horse, and heaven only knows that's on the ragged end of creation, way out on Rainwater Flats."

"Somebody's got to tell her." Wallis was shaking his head. "I'd hate to be the one."

Shotwell moved away from the body. "I'll relieve your mind," he said evenly. "The job's all mine; I'll tell Mrs. Waggoner. Some of you bring Waggoner along. We'll take him to the undertaker's parlor in Sweetroot."

They had slow going carrying the dead man back to the horses. A Seven Dot rider found Waggoner's bay, and the body was lashed across the animal. They were a silent bunch as they returned to Sweetroot.

BACK in town now, Shotwell ignored the excited citizens with their clamor of questions. Let them be amazed about Sam's guilt, he thought impatiently. He turned the body over to Clarence Perkins, the undertaker. Then he swung the roan toward the outskirts of town. The sooner he got this next job over with, the better he'd feel.

He rode toward Black Horse Ranch. It was not too far from town and it was within his jurisdiction, Sweetroot County. However, Rainwater Flats was the most barren, desolate stretch in the whole surrounding area. Only fools, or the destitute, would try to ranch there.

He dreaded this forthcoming meeting with the woman more than he dreaded a killer's bullet. Maybe she knew about Sam's association with Braden; maybe she didn't. But Burt Shotwell's lead, or somebody's, had downed her husband, and the knowledge of it would leave a wound inside Elsie Waggoner deeper than any gun could.

Shotwell liked being sheriff. He'd come by it naturally, he reckoned, because his father had kept the peace in this county for twenty years. Old Rafe Shotwell might still have been sheriff, if he hadn't died in a gunsmoke duel with a bank robber.

His son had pinned on the badge then, knowing he lacked one qualification that would make him the equal of his father. He wasn't tough enough. He wanted to be tough; when he did his duty with a gun or a rope, he tried hard to keep from going soft.

Sam had been young, a few years younger than Shotwell. Somewhere along the way, he'd gotten on the wrong side of the fence. Maybe, with the right breaks, he'd have straightened out. But he'd gone too far when he started stealing his neighbors' cows. The law said a man must hang for that.

It was a cruel judgment, in Shotwell's opinion; the punishment was worse than the crime. He did think, though, that the lawbreakers should be handed a stiff sentence, measured by the extent of their crimes.

Shotwell was crossing the Flats, parched and dry under the blazing sun. He remembered that he had seen Elsie Waggoner a few times in Sweetroot, but had never given her a second glance. It was the same with Sam; he had not been a man who attracted attention.

Reining up before the ranch buildings now, Shotwell was surprised to find them in good repair. New paint sparkled from the stout frame house and the big rambling barn. On the other hand, he thought, maybe he shouldn't be surprised; Sam's rustling activities must have provided him with enough cash to put the place in order.

He was swinging down from the saddle when Elsie Waggoner ran from the house. He was uncomfortably aware of the sheriff's badge shining on his calfskin vest. There was alarm on her face, which was still young and pretty. It showed mostly in the worry-shadowed blue eyes, and in the tightly drawn mouth.

"You've come about Sam," she said. "Something's happened to Sam."

He had to be blunt, but he tried to soften it. "That's right, Mrs. Waggoner. Sam's been in trouble."

"I knew it. Sam's been gone for two days; I knew something terrible had happened to him. Tell me, Sheriff, is he hurt? Where is he? Can I go to see him?"

"Sam's dead, Mrs. Waggoner."

She stepped back as if he had dealt her a blow in the face. She went pale, and put a hand against her mouth to keep from crying out.

"Somebody had to tell you." The words tumbled out of Shotwell. "Being sheriff, I had to be the one. And I reckon it goes further than that. You see, in a way, I'm responsible for your husband's death."

It was out now, without pulling the punches, just as it had to be.

She came forward again. She had mustered some self-control. She stared at him. Shotwell had the feeling, suddenly, that she hadn't received entirely unexpected news. Perhaps she had tried to prepare herself for tragedy.

"You?" she asked. "You killed Sam?"

"I'm not sure if I did it directly," he told her truthfully. "But I was giving the orders, and one of my posse dropped Sam in his tracks." He gave her the ugly details, then, about the fight in the canyon.

"There's one thing I don't know," he went on. "I don't know if you realized what your husband was doing when he was away from home. But the fact is he was on the wrong side

of the law. He traveled with a gent named Gus Braden, and they were mighty free with their wide loops. We caught them red-handed this morning, shoving along some Seven Dot steers they'd cut from the herd last night. That's when the chase began."

But she didn't seem to be listening to him. "You killed Sam," she repeated. It was a statement, not a question, this time. "You hide behind a star because that way you can get away with your cold-blooded lust for killing. You didn't even try to take Sam alive. And now you're here, giving me a sermon about law and order."

SHOTWELL took a deep breath. He said, "If I had brought Sam in, the cards would still have been against him—and me. He would have had a fair trial, but the jury could have come up with only one verdict. I would have had to hang your husband. I wouldn't have liked it, but I'd have done it. And you'd have branded me a killer anyway."

She said, "You've done your duty, Sheriff—to Sam and to me. I'll be grateful if you'll leave."

He should have gone from Black Horse as fast as his roan would take him. But still he lingered. "You're alone now," he observed. "Blame me for it, if that helps. A woman alone, though, has no business on Rainwater Flats. After the—the funeral, you'd better stay in town for a while till you can get somebody to run your place."

That made her anger flare again.

"If that's your roundabout way of offering me help, Sheriff, you're wasting your time. I have to live with what Sam's been, and I'll do it by myself."

"So you believe Sam ran wild. You knew it all the time."

"Why should I deny it?" she flashed. "I don't care what you think; I don't care what other folks think. All right, Sam rode with a bad crowd, even before we were married. Call me a chump, but I believed I could help him get started on the right path. He swore he would break with the old bunch if I became his wife."

"And do you think he really tried?"

"Sometimes I did." She forgot to be angry now, and the tears, long held back, came welling up. "Yes, I'm sure of it. But it was a hard row for him. His reputation would catch up with him, and he'd lose job after job. Somehow we saved enough to make a down payment on a ranch, even if it had to be a stretch of ruin like Black Horse. But I thought at last I could hold my head up proud.

"You don't know Black Horse, Sheriff. It had us whipped from the start. Sam kept fighting, hard. From sunup to sundown he was in the field, plowing, pulling up stumps, clearing out rocks, and trying to build up a scraggly herd. The land didn't yield, as we'd hoped it would. Sam had to take outside work. Sometimes it was haying, sometimes it was helping on a roundup. He'd be gone for days, but I didn't question him. My faith, then, was strong."

Shotwell asked then, "What happened to change it?"

"He started flashing more money than he could possibly earn at a decent job. Still I didn't say anything. I kept trying to give him the benefit of the doubt, but I knew I was wrong. He spent the money building up Black Horse, such as it is. He spent money on me too.

"I was ashamed. I was afraid to go to town. I felt as guilty as he was. Yet I'd still try to believe he was actually working with a haying crew somewhere. Of course he never mentioned a man named Gus Braden. You were the first to do that."

She had doubtless said more than she intended to. But it was a much-needed release—a chance to talk she hadn't had in a long time. Then she seemed to remember she had intended to hate Burt Shotwell, and the blaze of anger returned to her blue eyes. She tossed back her blonde hair with furious contempt, and stood up straight and defiant.

Shotwell mounted and gathered up his reins. He was really going this time. "Think over what I said, Mrs. Waggoner. At a time like this, you need people."

He whirled the roan away, heading for town. He tried to dwell on other things—like what he ought to do about Gus Braden—but always his thoughts came back to Elsie Waggoner. She must have loved Sam a great deal to stand by him so fiercely through the years. Sam had never proved he was worth it, and now it was

too late. But Shotwell might have made it too late.

The next morning he dressed for Sam's funeral. He would rather have faced hell itself than see Elsie in her grief, but it was something a man had to do—pay his respects, even if he was despised.

"Hold on, Sheriff. You can shed those fancy duds and get busy. Braden's on the prowl again." It was Hiram Swift, storming into his office.

The Tincup owner was followed by his rancher neighbors. The room became crowded with grim faces. Evidently they'd met for a pow-wow before confronting Shotwell.

"All right," Shotwell said crisply. "I'm listening."

"He struck my place again," Swift said. "I had the herd guarded, but somehow he got away with ten head. What are you going to do about Braden, Sheriff?"

Shotwell's jaws twitched. "If he crowds his luck enough, I'll get him. Either that, or he'll get me. I'll look for his sign from Tincup, Hiram."

FRANK REDDING, Seven Dot's owner, bristled. "We figure we made a mistake in electing you. You're not the man your father was, and you never will be. Old Rafe would have moved hell itself to bring in Braden, either cold with a bullet in him or hot and ready for a rope. That's what we liked about Rafe—he wasn't sentimental. He wouldn't go traipsing off to shed tears for a rustler's widow."

"And that's another thing, Sheriff." Cartwheel's owner, John Morey, spoke up. "Are you going to let that Waggoner woman get away with this? Sam sank stolen-beef money into Black Horse. We're putting in our claims for our losses. We want every cent of it back, if we have to tear that run-down spread apart. You're the law here; you should do something about it."

"Not so fast," Shotwell said. "Elsie Waggoner wasn't a part of that mess. If you think Black Horse owes you anything, you'll have to take your claims to court and prove them. That'll be a tough job. I'm betting you won't find a single misbranded cow on the Flats."

"You're hoping we won't," Kim Hollister accused. He owned Open A and he was the youngest of the bunch. "You're shining up to Elsie Waggoner. Maybe she reckons you're a good catch, now that Sam's gone. Or maybe you're just planning."

In a single stride Shotwell reached Hollister. He brought his fist crashing against the rancher's chin. Kim Hollister was driven to the wall, where he slid down in a heap.

"Keep your dirty tongue quiet," Shotwell ordered, evenly. "That goes for all of you. I'll run this office the way I see fit. Now clear out, the whole whining bunch of you. If it makes you feel any better, I promise to get Braden or to turn in my star."

He watched them drag Hollister to his feet. Grumbling, they left. In a couple of minutes they were riding angrily out of town.

Shotwell did take time to attend Sam's funeral. The minister did all he could for Sam, but the brief eulogy necessarily lacked enthusiasm. Elsie sat quiet and withdrawn, emotion showing only in her eyes and her quivering lips. When the minister said something about the law's having to take its course, Shotwell winced. He followed the somber procession to Sweetroot's weed-grown cemetery. He was relieved when the whole business was over.

Afterward he got into rough range garb and rode toward Tincup. He had the feeling that Braden was laughing at him. Braden was getting a little reckless now, boldly playing a lone hand. Maybe he figured he didn't need a partner. He had survived a suicidal dash out of the canyon, and probably believed that his luck would last a long time.

Shotwell was glad he didn't have a posse of cowmen along this time. If he had to take chances, he wasn't risking anybody else's neck. Besides, it was easier to work things out alone. You could plan your own silent strategy, and try to anticipate the other man's.

This was the part of his job he liked. He wanted to like all of it—but becoming the image of tough Rafe Shotwell was a tall order. Maybe it was something you never grew into; you had to be born that way.

He had never met Braden, but the rustler's reputation was well-known. He had eluded a dozen sheriffs before coming into the Buscaderos. When the going was tight, he killed. Cattle were his specialty. Sometimes he worked

with a partner, sometimes he didn't. Women were his fancy, according to the reward dodgers; whether willing or not, they made for him a pleasant diversion from the cattle raids.

Tincup Ranch bordered Rainwater Flats on the south. In a back pasture, Shotwell located tracks of the ten head being pushed toward the hills. In the distance he could see the newly painted holdings of Black Horse. Elsie would be going back there today, to the bleak loneliness it now held. Before, her life men were raging with impatience, threatening to boot the sheriff out now and hold a special election.

THE morning after another Tincup coup, Shotwell was crossing a corner of the Flats, his search again leading him into the mountains. He pulled up hard, suddenly, forgetting all about Gus Braden.

A rider was hazing a small bunch of cattle toward a fenced enclosure, here on the stony

"I just happen to like to ride sidesaddle."

had been full of insecurity; from now on it would have no purpose whatever.

He followed the tracks into the rocky rises of the Buscaderos, and there lost them. Still he kept searching, but it was no use.

He didn't quit. Every day he went out. He spent more time hunting Braden than he did performing any of his other duties. He gave himself a week to produce results. If he failed, he was through as sheriff of Sweetroot County.

The raids continued. Cartwheel reported a sizable loss, twenty-five head. Open A was hit for the third time in a month. The cowedges of the Flats. The pen was crowded with bawling, stamping stock. The rider was Elsie.

As he watched, a rangy steer turned on the horse. With horns lowered, he rammed the frightened animal, and Elsie was thrown to the ground. She was momentarily dazed, but she fought to her feet and started to run.

Any moment now, the steer's attention might swing from the horse to the girl. Shotwell dug in the spurs and raced for the steer, who now seemed to notice Elsie for the first time. The steer was lumbering after her, covering ground with surprising speed. Elsie kept

running and stumbling. Shotwell came alongside the steer and threw himself from leather onto its horns.

The steer was a wiry old devil. He thrashed and pawed dust and tried to shove his horns knifing through Shotwell. Shotwell hung on, twisting with a violent strength. He had to turn that tough neck—or Elsie and he were finished. Abruptly he heard something crack, give way, in the animal.

It was quickly over. The steer landed hard, Shotwell still twisting on the horns until all of the brute's fight was gone. After a few moments, Shotwell released him and stepped back. The steer rolled, snorted, and struggled upright. Whipped, he scampered off.

Shotwell ran to the girl. "Are you all right?" he asked anxiously.

She brushed dust from her jeans with her Stetson. "You've felt you owed me something," she said tightly. "Well, you've paid. Thanks to you, I can go on living my messed-up life."

"You didn't seem eager to wait for that steer to kill you," Shotwell pointed out, wryly. "Why are you out here trying to play cowboy all by yourself?"

"You want to know why?" She gave him a quick look. "I'll tell you. The people in this country don't like Elsie Waggoner. I don't care about that; but they're not going to call me a thief."

"But why the rounded-up herd?"

"I'm going to sell them," she snapped. "I'm going to find a buyer and sell out everything that Sam put into Black Horse. Don't worry, you won't find a rustled cow among them. Sam was too smart to bring them here. I'll pay back every rancher for his losses—or as much as the equity will bring. After I'm through, maybe I'll have enough left for train fare to take me away from this country."

"But you're doing a man's chore," Shotwell argued, concerned. "And you're working for nothing. There's not a buyer who will give a second look at that scrubby herd. This dried-up graze wouldn't fatten up a quarter of your tally, and your farming sod is nothing but a bake oven. You couldn't *give* Black Horse away."

She blazed up at that. "I *will* find a buyer, Sheriff. And I'll do it alone, even if it is a man's job. Now stop wasting your time and mine. Sweetroot County's paying you to do their killing for them, not to hang around Black Horse."

He rode away, looking for Braden's trail again. He tried to figure out Elsie Waggoner, and knew it was useless. To her, he was a hired killer behind a badge. Whether his bullet or a posseman's had found Sam made no difference. Sam, however weak he'd been, had been her reason for living.

No, he thought suddenly. Sam wasn't her only reason. She was carrying on now, trying to right the wrongs he had done. A real purpose was driving her—to pay a huge debt she felt she owed. She believed she shared some of the guilt for Sam's crimes—and in her selfless way maybe she was guilty. This country shouldn't expect anything greater than her attempt at atonement. It made of Elsie Waggoner something wonderful.

Realization hit him then, causing him to pull up. He was in love with Elsie. And his badge would always shine out between them—that and a black memory—preventing her from returning his feelings.

NEXT day he caught up with Gus Braden. He had picked up the trail while it was hot. Braden was running off a little batch of Seven Dot stuff. A small piece of luck had allowed Shotwell to be close at hand. Instead of returning to Sweetroot after one of his searches, he had spent the night at the base of the Buscaderos.

The sound of shots had awakened him in the morning. Riding to investigate, he found three Seven Dot riders giving up pursuit. They had spotted Braden once—hence the shooting. But Braden, from a vantage point, had driven them back with his blazing gun. Then he had disappeared with the cattle in the puzzling maze of the hills.

Shotwell had been closer to that vantage point than the three riders. He sent his roan streaking up a rock-walled canyon, hoping to intercept Braden. He saw sign that Braden had just been through here.

The trouble was, a lot of side draws branched off from the canyon. Braden could have cut the cattle into any one of them. Heedless of the danger of the steep trail, Shotwell

pushed his mount to the utmost. He lost the tracks on the jumbled floor, but he heard bawling cattle ahead. All he had to do was to follow his ears.

He must be entering the right draw now, because the sounds were louder. He could hear Braden shouting at the cattle. The rustler was just around the next bend. Shotwell slowed up, to keep from betraying his presence, but went on steadily enough to gain ground. He drew his gun as he rounded the bend. Before him was Gus Braden, shoving along eight two-year-olds.

"It's all over, Braden," Shotwell yelled. "Raise 'em high."

Braden had evidently sworn to himself that he would never be taken alive. He swung his horse around, firing. Shotwell hadn't pulled his trigger yet. He felt pain hit his shoulder. The force of it knocked him from his saddle, and he struck the ground hard. He set his teeth, fighting against blacking out.

Braden laughed. "My luck hasn't run out yet, Sheriff. But it's getting kind of monotonous, killing lawmen who want to be heroes. In an hour or two I'll have these cattle corraled in Scavenger Canyon; that's out of your bailiwick, and that's where the rest of the boys take over. Then I'm coming back for some fun."

Shotwell thought of Elsie, alone on Black Horse. He thought of Braden's reputation with women.

"Yep, Sam was some talker," Braden went on, musingly. "He was always bragging about that woman of his, how she was too good for him. I decided sometime I'd have a look for myself. I never liked husbands interfering, and the other day was just as good a time as any to kill Sam."

Shotwell groaned inwardly; his gun was just out of reach.

"I fired an angle shot from a short distance, and there were no powder marks," Braden boasted. "Not that I give a hang about hiding a killing, but it makes it easier when I call on his widow. It doesn't matter how much I've told you, because a dead lawdog doesn't get very gabby."

Braden nudged his mount closer, to finish the job if necessary. Shotwell deliberately made himself limp. The ruse worked, because the second shot didn't come. Laughing again, Braden rode on, pushing the cattle.

When he was out of sight, Shotwell struggled to sit up. His wound was paining him, weakening him, but it could have been worse. Now he was cursing himself more than the wound. Braden's back had been to him, and Shotwell could have gotten in the first slug.

He hadn't used his gun because he had gone soft—because he lacked the necessary hardness, even though Elsie was in danger. Burt Shotwell might as well turn in his star, as he'd agreed. He was of no use as a lawman.

He got to his feet, swaying, breathing heavily. All he could think of was Braden's evil face, the deliberate movements of the big-bodied man advancing toward Elsie. He stooped for his gun and holstered it. He would kill with this gun next time. Only there might not be a next time.

He couldn't afford any delays, if he was to get to Black Horse. He wouldn't stop to bandage his shoulder, which was bleeding a little. The pain was more intense, he hoped, than the wound was alarming. Somehow he staggered to the roan, and climbed aboard. He started the long ride out of the mountains.

It seemed as if he were riding forever. He ignored the agony in his shoulder now, going on his will. His wound was more serious than he realized, but he didn't care. Once or twice, he blacked out in the saddle.

Another time, he found himself on the ground, awakening to a blurry world. How long he'd been there, he didn't know. He lost all track of time. Hours might have passed, and Elsie might be beyond help.

HE FELL two more times, but pulled himself back into the saddle. At last he was conscious of leaving the hills and of moving across the Flats. He was nearing Black Horse, and the knowledge bolstered him suddenly. Some strength began to flow through him. He wondered if it would be enough.

He pulled up behind the barn. Braden's horse stood here ground-hitched. The horse was blowing. That meant Braden had just gotten here. Shotwell slid down. Easing his gun into his hand, he hastened toward the house. He was still a little woozy, his sur-

roundings still a little foggy. But everything depended on alertness and speed now.

He heard Elsie cry out, and now he was running. With one terrific shove the door burst open, and he was in the room. Elsie was trying to free herself from Braden's grasp. At Shotwell's intrusion Braden loosed his hold and spun, at the same time jerking his gun.

He never fired it. Elsie had darted to a corner, giving Shotwell freedom of movement. His trigger squeeze was careful and measured. He watched his bullet go into Braden's chest. Braden collapsed where he stood. He was dying.

"Damn you, lawman," he choked.

Shotwell came to him. It was the first time he felt no pity for a man he had killed. "A while back you were in a bragging mood, Braden, when you figured I was a goner. Well, you're the goner now, and you might as well make your last story straight. Repeat what happened to Sam."

Who could tell what were a dying man's last thoughts? Braden managed a short laugh. "Why not?" he agreed, finally. "I damned well won't hang for it now. Sure I killed Sam —and the others."

It was all he could say, because Gus Braden was dead. Shotwell dropped his gun and lurched to the table, steadying himself.

Elsie rushed to him. Alarm in her voice, she said, "You're hurt. You're hurt bad."

"I'll be going," he said weakly. "I won't make a nuisance of myself."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," she said. "I'm going to take care of you."

"I'm a badge-toter, remember?" He couldn't help saying it. "You hate all badge-toters. I might have killed Sam Waggoner, if somebody hadn't beaten me to it."

Not until she'd dressed his wound, and he'd refused to lie down and rest, did she look up. "Burt Shotwell, you're a persistent man. Three times you've been to Black Horse—each time with a helping hand. And I gave you nothing but hate. What you don't know is that I hated Elsie Waggoner."

Shotwell stared. "That's crazy."

"I hated myself because I'd failed with Sam. You were decent to me, but I resented myself because you represented the law—and I was a criminal, trying to blind myself to Sam's wrongdoing. Sam's fresh in his grave, but he's already a mistake deep in the past. For the first time in my life I know I'm standing on the good, solid earth. I know what I want."

Ignoring his wound, then, Shotwell took her in his arms. He said, "Elsie, I have three things to do. I have to tip off the sheriff of Pinto Malo County, so he can corral the rest of the gang in Scavenger Canyon. And I'll find you a buyer for Black Horse. Then I'm going to be powerfully busy, trying to make up for your heartaches of the past. Maybe someday you'll marry a lonesome lawman."

Maybe he would learn in time, Shotwell thought, how to be tough. But he needed no lessons, now, in being tender.

INDIAN MARRIAGE CUSTOMS

EVER since time began, man has pursued woman when needing a wife—he thinks. One Indian tribe of North America did it backward. An Indian maiden, when she saw the brave she wanted, went to her father and said, "Get that man for me." The father then went to the boy's parents, told them of his daughter's wishes, and proceeded to make the marriage deal. The groom was expected to make some kind of payment for the girl.

Among some Apaches, when a girl reached marriagable age her folks gave a feast, and there was singing and dancing—probably like our modern coming-out parties. A brave who liked her would come at night and tie his pony outside her father's lodge. If the father and the maiden liked the man, she kept the pony four days, fed and watered him, then returned him to his owner. This meant that all was well and arrangements could be made to tie the knot.

In a Shoshone courtship, the braves had to run the girls down on foot and lasso them. As a rule the girls were fleeter than the men, and managed to keep from getting caught by any men but the ones they wanted. The Pueblo Indians were of a more sentimental nature. The unmarried warriors sat outside the village and waited for the young girls to come and sit by their side. This arrangement seemed to work out fine, although nothing is known about what happened if two girls sat with the same brave.

——*Fred Harvey*

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a True Story

By T. J. KERTTULA
and D. L. McDONALD

The Two-Cent Stampede

DURING the winter of 1878-79 the whole male population of Missoula, Montana, was on edge and ready to stampede. The reason for the excitement was that one Martin Davis had reputedly hit paydirt in the gravel of Maginis Gulch, just before the winter freeze-up set in

There wasn't a closer-mouthed man in camp than Martin Davis, and people figured that if he'd been driven to talk about his find it must be something *big*. The only one he'd confided in was his partner, one Jim Meininger, and Martin had sworn him to secrecy. But Jim had a drink or two too many and let the secret slip, and in less than an hour the whole camp was running several degrees of gold fever.

It would have taken only a word to start every able-bodied man in Missoula on the trail for Maginnis Gulch, which lay west of the Flathead reservation and near Camas Praire. But cooler heads realized that, should a stampede start in the middle of a Montana winter, a good many of the weaker and less experienced prospectors would undoubtedly die along the way.

They worked out a plan whose purpose was to hold the men in camp until spring. It consisted merely of a daily roll call of all males at dawn. If a man failed to answer roll call, a determined search of the camp would be made for him. If he couldn't be found, it would mean he had tried to get a head start to Maginnis Gulch. It would then be time enough for the rest of the gold seekers to hit the trail to catch up with the over-anxious prospectors.

The roll-call plan worked satisfactorily until, on an unseasonably warm morning in mid-February, three prospectors—Bill Lyons, Tom McNamara, and Johnny Sheehan—failed to answer. They'd been seen around camp late

the night before, so they could only have five or six hours' head start toward the gold everyone wanted. The town had no intention of giving them more.

Less than an hour after roll call, Jim Meininger took to the trail with two companions, Dick Cunningham and Bill Prescott. They moved out as the advance unit of a larger party to follow. All over town, other groups were making up similar expeditions.

Since the day was warm and sunny, Meininger and his men tried to gain an advantage over the parties to follow by not bothering to pack a winter outfit. In fact, they didn't even take a pack horse. Each man just wrapped ten pounds of flour and a little coffee in a blanket and tied it on behind his saddle, leaving the matter of additional supplies to the main party, which was planning to start off within a matter of hours.

In addition to the heavy mackinaws the Meininger trio wore and the skimpy bundles tied to their saddles, their "survival kit" consisted simply of three bottles of rum that Prescott had thoughtfully brought along.

They stopped for the night at the cabin of a man named Alex Morrigeau, where the rest of their party—Captain Townsend, Sam Mitchell, Pat Mahoney, Joe Booth and Bill Chinn—caught up with them just before midnight. While they were preparing to bed down, another party of gold seekers went past the cabin in a sled.

Pat Mahoney and Joe Booth immediately decided to follow them, but the rest refused to budge until morning. About 2 A.M., Mahoney and Booth started out. The rest of the stampeders lay down on the cabin's dirt floor to wait for dawn.

They made an early start and, accompanied by Morigeau, who by now had caught the gold fever too, they arrived at Antoine's Ford by full daylight. After the crossing, they pulled up to make coffee before hitting the trail again. While they were searching for dry wood to build a fire, sifting snow began to fall.

The storm strengthened rapidly and the men agreed that the important thing was to get across Camas Prairie to the shelter of the mountains as quickly as possible. The thought of a fire and hot coffee was abandoned. While their horses munched a couple of handfuls of oats, the men gulped a cold breakfast.

By the time they swung into their saddles the storm had reached almost blizzard proportions. The flying snow, which had already begun to drift, cut visibility to almost zero. Within a mile or two Bill Chinn's horse, ridden too hard the day before, began to play out. Prescott was already leading his tired pony to conserve its strength.

Slowly the two fell behind, without the others noticing it. For a while they were able to follow the tracks of the larger party, but soon the falling snow blotted them out and the two men could only stumble along blindly in the general direction they thought the others had taken.

Neither man was sure they were on the right track, and they differed as to which way they should go. Both Chinn and Prescott were sure now that there was little chance of contacting the main party until the storm played itself out.

They lost all thought of gold as the icy northeaster swept them along before it. Now it was simply a case of survival, with Prescott favoring an immediate return to Antoine's Ford—if they could find it—and Chinn insisting they hole up right where they were until the storm died down. Prescott finally agreed to stop after Chinn flatly refused to make a try for the river.

KICKING away the snow from a slight hollow, they lay down and spread their blankets over themselves, expecting the snow to drift over them, sealing them in and conserving the slight heat their bodies generated.

But the fierce wind, which might have covered their dead bodies beyond hope of discovery until spring, refused to cooperate to save their lives. Instead, it tore at the blankets, sifting the fine snow under them onto the two men huddled together.

Here it melted and soaked their clothing, making their discomfort grow almost unbearable. Prescott, whose feet were already dampened from his long walk in the snow, soon realized that they were freezing.

Flinging off the blankets, he stumbled painfully erect. "You can stay here and freeze if

you want to, Chinn," he said, "but I'm heading back to the river while I can still walk."

Chinn continued to argue, but when he saw Prescott lurch off into the snow, he crawled to his feet and stumbled after him. Now they were quartering the wind and the going was easier, but Chinn rapidly played out and the stronger Prescott kept him going only by a judicious use of the "survival kit" rum.

One bottle was empty and another lowering fast when, long after dark, they reached the river and found the ford. By then Chinn was unable to mount his horse to cross the river to better camping sites on the other side, so Prescott started off alone to search for a place where they could wait out the night.

A short distance downstream he found what he had hoped for—a little hollow in the lee of a high bank. It held a small clump of cottonwoods, some of the wood still dry enough to kindle. There was even a little grass for the horses, and plenty of young cottonwood bark—often used as emergency horse feed in severe weather.

There, with their blankets pitched between a fire and the bank, the men spent the night. After dividing a small can of sardines, their only food, and washing it down with generous amounts of rum, Chinn went to sleep. Prescott, his frost-bitten feet rapidly becoming more painful, could not sleep, so he spent the night tending the fire.

By morning the wind and snow had abated, but it was much colder. On the river, the shore ice extended far out from the banks, and the current itself ran sluggishly, choked with slush ice.

An attempt to ford it with their unshod ponies was out of the question, for the animals could never climb out on the other side. Reluctantly, the two turned back across Camas Prairie. A cold north wind was still blowing.

Food was their first requirement. As the prairie was often used as winter cattle range, they decide their best bet was to find and kill a steer. They only had sixguns, and the chance of getting close enough to game for a sure kill was remote. And, in their present state, the two knew that their chances of catching up to the rest of their party depended upon their finding food—soon.

After a mile or two they spotted a small bunch of cattle huddle together in a draw. Creeping slowly toward them, Prescott drew his sixgun. But when he was almost within shooting distance, he stopped and motioned Chinn to listen. Had it been only the wind, or was he beginning to hear things?

They sat and listened. Above the whine of the wind it came again—the clear distant clang of a bell.

"It's the bell on the lead horse of a pack train," Prescott exclaimed. "It must be another bunch of stampeders heading out for Maginnis Gulch."

He was right. A quarter of a mile away, a pack train and five riders rounded a butte. It was a man named Alex Downs and his party, bound for gold diggin's. But when they saw the plight of Prescott and Chinn they immediately made camp, fed the weakened men, outfitted them with dry clothing, and, to the best of their ability, treated their frostbites. It was agreed that the two should accompany the group until they found their own party.

They had not long to wait. Less than two hours farther along the way they met Captain Townsend and his group returning with the discouraging news that there was no gold in Maginnis Gulch. The Downs party decided to ride on and find out for themselves, but Prescott and Chinn turned back with their own friends.

The river crossing was still too dangerous to attempt, so they elected to follow the west side of the river in search of a better one. After a time they met a small party of Flathead braves. None of the Indians knew of a dependable ford and, when asked whether any of them would be willing to ride into the river in search of one, they all shook their heads. Finally Captain Townsend flashed a five-dollar gold piece, and one brave reluctantly agreed to try.

STRIPPING in spite of the sub-zero weather, he handed his clothing to a companion and rode naked into the icy stream. Immediately his horse was swept off its feet and began to swim downriver. The brave, with only his head above water, worked frantically to push ice cakes out of the way before they unseated him. Then man and horse disap-

peared around a bend. Whites and Indians spurred along the bank to keep them in sight.

A hundred yards downstream the brave and his pony fetched up against a sand bar where the water was shallow enough for horses to cross without wetting stirrup-leather. He rode back and forth to show the others just where to go, then climbed shivering out of the river.

Wrapped in robes by his companions, and hustled to a fire, he was soon finishing off Prescott's final bottle of rum. The white men, having seen what might have happened to them if they'd attempted to find the ford themselves, gladly chipped in to provide an extra cash bonus for the brave.

Morrigeau, with the only sharp-shod horse in the party, rode into the river to break trail. Spurring his animal against the shore ice, he cleared a path for the unshod horses to follow. The crossing was uneventful, and the party set out immediately for Missoula.

Morrigeau left them at his cabin, but the rest of the party did not stop there, for the weather was getting colder and Prescott's feet were in very bad condition. They had to get him to town while he could still ride.

They reached Missoula late that night, with the thermometer reading forty below. The doctor summoned to look at Prescott's feet was at first determined to amputate them. But after the patient had profanely refused permission, and had backed it up with his sixgun, the medico reluctantly agreed to try to save the frostbitten extremities.

Gradually the rest of the stampeders straggled back to town with varying degrees of frostbite and snow blindness as their souvenirs of Maginnis Gulch—but no gold.

It was not until late spring, when Prescott was again able to hobble around on crutches, that he met Martin Davis in a saloon and put to him the question the whole town had neglected to ask before stampeding.

"Martin, did you really find gold in Maginnis Gulch last fall?"

"Yep."

"How much?"

"Well, like I told Jim Meininger, I panned out a little color."

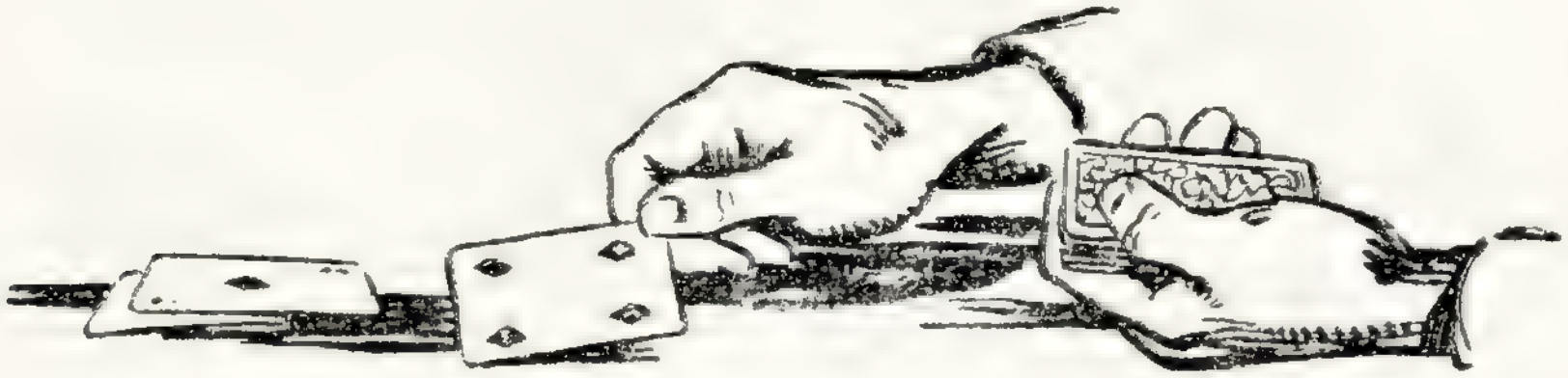
"What did it run?" Prescott persisted.

Davis considered a while. "Well, I don't know. I didn't figure it was worth assaying. I'd guess maybe two, three cents a pan."

Prescott stared down at his still-bandaged feet. "Martin," he said softly, "It seems to me you shouldn't mention that sum to the rest of the boys. I reckon they're happier not knowing they stampeded sixty or seventy miles in the dead of a Montana winter for stakes no bigger than a couple of cents a pan."

With a nod, laconic Martin Davis agreed.

As far as is known, most Missoulans never did find out that they'd taken part in a two-cent stampede.



KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 53)

1. Philip Ketchum, writer; Philip Coe, Texas gambler; Philip Sheridan, army officer.
2. No, although all three do belong to the grouse family.
3. Use it on a horse. A muzzle strap of leather, rawhide, metal or rope around a horse's nose above the nostrils, used for control in lieu of a bridle bit, is called a *bosal*.
4. Cimarrón, New Mexico.
5. Sam Bass was the outlaw, Bass Outlaw the Ranger.
6. Palomino.
7. Gravy.
8. The Comstock Lode, the world's richest silver mine, in Nevada.
9. Paint, pinto or piebald.
10. Black Jack Ketchum.

OUT OF THE CHUTES

WHEN Jim Shoulders stood in the middle of the arena at the Denver National Rodeo to be named All-Around Champion Cowboy, he looked slightly surprised at the ovation he got from the crowd. There was a "Who, me?" expression on his face, which was quite sincere even though he had known for several weeks that he had won not only the All-Around Championship, but also the bareback bronc-riding and bull-riding titles, and in doing so had racked up an all-time record of $43,381 for cowboy earnings during a single year.

He was All-Around Champion once before, in 1949. Since then he holds the dubious distinction of being runner-up more often than any other cowboy in the RCA—during four years of the intervening six. This year he won both his events and the All-Around, hands down.

To Jim, the glamor, the excitement of rodeo come second. He sees the sport first as a business, in which he is fortunate enough to be successful. And he works at it like a business. As soon as the dates of the important rodeos are set, early in the year, Jim figures out an itinerary for himself so he can take in the most shows with the greatest financial rewards to the winners.

In 1956 he entered eighty rodeos. He accomplished the astonishing feat of winning money at fifty-seven of them.

He frankly admits he's in rodeo for the money it brings him.

"Who isn't?" he inquires, not expecting an answer. "No matter how much a cowboy may like to ride or rope, he couldn't go through the gruelling schedule of big-time competition just for fun."

Recently he roughly figured his winnings for the nine years he's been in rodeo—starting when he was a high school junior. He came up 000. But don't think of that figure as a profit.

"I'd say that a fellow like me, who rodeos for a living and goes after the championship, can keep about half of what he earns—before taxes," says Jim.

Travel is his biggest expense. He covered 60,000 miles last year to enter rodeos in sixteen states and Canada, and he crossed nearly all the forty-eight states in getting to shows as far apart as San Antonio and Calgary, Walla Walla and New York.

Entry fees, which are high in the big shows Jim competes in, take another large slice out of his winnings. Clothes and equipment aren't cheap, either, but Jim avoids one large expense by sticking firmly to riding events, thus not needing his own mount, as calf-ropers and bulldoggers do.

There's no question, however, that Jim thinks what money he has left over after expenses is worth his time and effort. He steadily invests his income in a ranch at Henryetta, Oklahoma. That ranch, and what it stands for, is probably the basic reason for Jim's drive. First of all, it's a dream come true, because Jim was a city boy, born and bred in Tulsa, who was firmly determined to be a cowboy ever since he can remember. Today the ranch is home—where his high school sweetheart, now his wife, and their three children live. Tomorrow—some tomorrow when Jim decides to quit—the ranch will be security, a place where he can live the life he's always wanted.

When will that tomorrow come?

Jim shakes his head at the question. "I'll know when I'm slipping. And when that day comes I'll say good-by to the bareback broncs and fork a nice, comfortable saddle on my own range."

Adios,
THE EDITORS

WHEN THIEVES FALL OUT

By RAY BEATTY

WADE RYAN drew his horse off the rutted wagon trail, back under the sheltering branches of the elms, and waited, keeping a tight rein on the jittery sorrel. Behind him the Mojave River gurgled convulsively in the darkness, churning toward the open desert.

Rain clouds still hung ominously over the foothills of the Sierras, and lightning flickered uneasily along the dark ridges above him. The towering elms were still wet from the evening's rain, and Ryan sat there, slouching his lean frame down in the saddle, listening to the slow dripping of water off the leaves.

At last he heard a lone horse coming down the trail from the mountains. When the rider loomed up a few feet away, Ryan called out, "Brett?"

WADE RYAN HAD LIVED in the wrong end of town too long . . . and now he was gambling everything on this chance to break away

Lightning flared briefly above them, silvering the gaunt elms. Brett Lane moved his bay in off the trail. Wade reined up beside him, and felt the tension slipping away.

"Hi, Brett! All set for Wednesday?"

"Yeah. I got all the horses we need, and camped them out near the Arrowhead fork. I'll bring them down tomorrow morning and space 'em out at ten-mile intervals the other side of Greasewood, as we planned. I have enough grub hidden away at Deep Creek to last us half the summer, if need be."

"How's the money holding out?"

"It's just about gone. Good horses come high, and I got the best."

"We'll get it back twenty times over when we clean out the bank Wednesday," Wade Ryan assured him. "It's going to be easier than I thought. It's been hotter than the devil on the desert all week. With the rain, the humidity will keep most people off the street. We got a lucky break, too. The sheriff is sick in bed. There's no law at all in town."

They didn't speak for a moment, just sat there silently listening to the night sounds.

"It'll be a cinch," Ryan added.

Brett Lane swung his bay closer to Wade Ryan, then reached out and caught him by the shoulder. "It'd better be, Wade," he said seriously in his slow Texas drawl. "I've been waiting a long time for this stake. When it's over we'll both have our own spreads; no more saddle-tramping. See you Wednesday!"

Lane slapped his bay hard with the loose reins and rode away quickly, swinging left up the wagon trail, back the way he'd come. Apprehensively, Ryan waited until he could no longer hear the hoofbeats of Brett's horse. Then he edged the sorrel back onto the wagon trail and set off at a steady lope down the winding road toward Greasewood. He'd been born and raised on the upper desert, and the sorrel followed the trail in utter darkness as if it had been born there, too.

At the hotel, Ryan stopped in at the lamplit dining room for a cup of coffee, then went upstairs to bed. It might be a long time before he slept in a real bed again, and he felt he might as well make the most of this one.

By Wednesday the rain clouds had blown away, the morning sun streamed in warmly through the hotel window, and the hot breath of the desert tugged at the homespun curtains. Wade propped a piece of broken mirror up in the window and shaved the black stubble off his face, stealing quick glances past the mirror at the old brownstone bank across the street.

With what water he had left in the flowered pitcher, he took a bath and put on a fresh shirt and jeans. Then he packed his warbag and crossed to the door of his room. With the door half open, he looked back for a long moment across the room, through the window toward the bank.

For a split second he toyed with the idea of not going through with it. But the Ryans had lived in the wrong end of town too long; there would be no turning back now. After today he would be Wade Ryan, outlaw.

By eight o'clock the sun was high over the shimmering desert, and with it came the sweltering, humid heat that invariably follows rain on the Mojave. Ryan tried to relax, to convince himself that the bank holdup would come off without a hitch. But he sat in the hotel dining room most of the morning, drinking coffee and rolling one cigarette after another.

Then it was two o'clock. Wade Ryan picked up his warbag and moved out into the barroom. Brett Lane was standing at the bar waiting, two drinks in front of him. Brett nodded curtly, indicating the drinks on the bar. Ryan crossed the room and picked up one of them. He sipped it slowly, letting the fiery liquid burn down into his throat.

Without speaking, the two men left the hotel, stopping outside long enough for Ryan to tie the warbag securely on the horse Brett had brought up for him. They led their two geldings across the deserted street, and Ryan tossed the reins of his horse over the rail.

Brett stayed outside with the horses. Ryan went in alone. There was nothing to it. Cal Summers and John Rolland didn't say a word. They raised their hands slowly when Ryan drew his .44 and pointed it at them. Paralyzed, they stood silently against the back wall while Wade stuffed a canvas sack with bills. Methodically he cleaned out the cash drawers and the open safe, but left the silver alone. When he had finished, he backed slowly toward the door, turned, and ran to the horses outside.

TOGETHER Ryan and Lane thundered up the narrow rutted main street of Greasewood. The street, dry now, and already baking hard under the desert sun, was completely deserted. At the edge of town the two riders turned right and headed west, running parallel to the wooded slopes of the Sierras.

They changed horses at each ten-mile interval as they had planned. Brett had tethered fresh mounts and left in readiness. Thirty miles out of Greasewood they swung sharply into the purple foothills to Deep Creek, cut off from the world by a narrow rock-strewn pass.

When they had dismounted and unsaddled their sweating horses under the shaded cottonwoods, the two men entered the shack where Brett had laid in a supply of food. Emptying the canvas sack on the wobbling table, they counted the take.

There was over ten thousand dollars. That meant they had gotten away with five thousand each, without firing a shot.

The days dragged by slowly in the utter solitude of Deep Creek. In five days a man can do a lot of thinking. Wade Ryan's mind slipped back time and again to the events which culminated in the robbery. He thought back over his twenty-two years, to the poverty of his childhood, the viciousness of his drunken father, the death of his sickened, unhappy mother in the tumbledown homestead outside of Greasewood. He recalled the nights he'd lain awake listening to the coarse, liquored snoring of his father, planning the things he'd do for his mother some day.

Perhaps she was better off now, happy in whatever world comes after this one. Wade and his father had buried her on the sandy slope above the unpainted shack they called home. With no reason to remain, Wade Ryan had left home, and had never seen his father again.

He'd wandered through Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, where he'd teamed up with Brett Lane. Together they planned great things. Somehow or other their plans hadn't worked out, and the two rode off together, bound for California, working out the details of the Greasewood robbery on the way.

Between them they'd raised three hundred dollars. They had gambled it all on the bank robbery, and it was beginning to look as if they'd won. Yet, day after day now, as Wade Ryan sat quietly on the green grass, looking up through the rippling cottonwoods toward the purple ridges of the Sierras, he wondered how his mother would have felt about it all.

Brett Lane had been doing a lot of thinking during the five days, too. But his thinking ran along different lines from Ryan's. On the sixth day Wade found out what had been going through Brett's mind. During the night the Texan had disappeared, taking the horses, Wade's gun, and the ten thousand dollars.

Some things you can be philosophical about; some you can't. Somewhere in his past, Wade had heard the story about there being no honor among thieves. But he hadn't thought it would ever apply to them, Brett Lane and Wade Ryan.

Ryan felt a sudden anger, and a thirst for revenge surged up inside him. Burning with resentment, he packed his warbag with some of the food Brett had left behind, flung it over his shoulder, and followed the hoofprints the horses had left in the sandy loam.

Brett Lane had most of the odds in his favor. He had the horses and the guns. But there was one thing he had overlooked: Wade Ryan had been raised in the Sierra foothill country, and Brett Lane had no idea what lay ahead of him along the wooded ridges on the way west.

The nearest spread to Deep Creek would be Rancho Verde, operated by Brad Ritter. But by this time Brad Ritter would know all about the Greasewood hold-up; he couldn't help but know. On the other hand, Ritter probably wouldn't recognize Wade Ryan. But Wade didn't intend to take any foolish chances. He'd seen Ritter around Greasewood, back in the old days before he'd headed out of town.

Cold, cynical, Ritter seemed to be bitter against the whole world. He had no reason to be, though. Rancho Verde had made him a lot of money down through the years, and Ritter had been able to hang onto most of it. His daughter Glenna had been one of the prettiest girls at Greasewood school, but old Brad had watched her closer than he watched his money.

Ritter was the largest shareholder in the

Greasewood bank, and Wade knew he could expect no mercy from old Brad, if the man learned Wade had walked off with ten thousand dollars of bank money.

BY NOON Wade had reached the east end of Rancho Verde range. He watched every tree and shrub for a sign of Brett Lane and the two horses. Here the slopes were pockmarked with stands of green juniper and ragged sagebrush. Ryan kept to the low ridges of the foothills, where the pines and spruce thinned out to make way for the wild, distorted brush of the desert.

With Ritter's ranch house and outbuildings in sight, Wade caught Brett's sign again. There were fresh droppings on the yellow soil, twin hoofprints in the rippled patches of sand. As Brett's trail approached Rancho Verde it moved back up the slope again, into the shaded evergreens. But by the time Ryan was directly above the ranch house he'd lost the trail again completely.

He cut a large circle, swinging back a few hundred feet to pick up Brett's sign again, his mind deeply absorbed in tracking down the renegade Texan. When he swung back up into the evergreens again, he heard the girl's voice call out to him.

"Hello, Wade!"

He stopped abruptly, not knowing for a moment whether to run or to stay. But her voice held a note of friendliness, and it struck him that she hadn't heard about the robbery. Or she hadn't heard that he was connected with it.

Glenna Ritter was sitting in the saddle of her well-bred palomino, looking as if she'd been born there. Wade hadn't seen Glenna in three years, but time hadn't done her any harm. She was as sweet and gracious as ever. Wade felt a self-conscious reddening sweep across his face. She smiled broadly and swung down from the palomino.

"Wade Ryan! Whatever are you doing way out here?"

She led the palomino up to him, shaking her long golden hair back over her shoulders. He'd remembered her eyes being blue. They seemed even bluer now, blue as the sky above the Sierras.

He had never been a good liar, and he knew she'd see it in his face if he didn't tell the truth now. So he turned away, facing the jagged rim, and shrugged toward the purple ridges above them.

"My horse threw me," he said, and finally turned back to her.

She looked at him queerly, as if searching for something he was hiding from her, but the shine didn't leave her eyes. "Come on down to the house," she suggested. "I'll get you one of our horses. We can hunt for yours together, if you like."

She started off toward the Rancho Verde, leading the palomino. Ryan followed her for a few steps, then halted uneasily.

"Is your father home?"

Glenna Ritter smiled. "He won't bite you," she said softly. "Anyway, he's gone to Greasewood. He won't be back until tonight.

"I guess he doesn't get to town very often," Ryan prodded.

"Not recently, Wade. He's been busy with spring round-up. We're short a few hands."

He felt for a moment that she had caught the look of relief creeping across his face. But she turned back to the palomino again, and he followed her down the rocky slope, through the pine archway Ritter had built over the ranch entrance. As they walked, Wade couldn't keep his eyes off the girl's trim, athletic figure, and he dreaded the possibility that she might suddenly turn around and catch him at it.

Glenna Ritter had become a beautiful young woman, and Wade Ryan wondered why he'd never really noticed the warmth of her smile, the softness of her voice, back in their schooldays in Greasewood.

They rounded the house, following a graveled lane flanked with transplanted Joshua trees and yucca. Behind the house, straddling a sweated roan, a tall, gaunt man was waiting for them. A cold chill of defeat swept over Wade as he recognized the rider, the last man on earth he wanted to meet here. It was John Haydon, sheriff of Greasewood.

Glenna greeted the sheriff in her warm friendly voice, and Ryan stood silently at the corner of the house as if he had suddenly lost the power of speech.

"You know Mr. Haydon, don't you, Wade?" Glenna was saying.

HAYDON smiled, and Wade watched the deep lines creep across the old sheriff's face. The lawman leaned forward, his folded arms resting across his saddle horn.

"Well, if it ain't Wade Ryan! Where've you been, Wade?"

Ryan wiped the sticky perspiration off his palms against the roughness of his faded jeans, and forced a grin. "Arizona, mostly," he said. "But I guess I just couldn't stay away from California."

"What brings you out this way, Mr. Haydon?" the girl asked. "Won't you come in the house where it's cool?"

"I'd better keep on traveling," the sheriff grinned, flicking a sly wink toward Ryan. "I doubt if I'm wanted around here anyway. Wade didn't come all the way back to Greasewood country to talk with lawmen."

Ryan forced a smile. You never said a truer word, Sheriff, he said to himself. But he saw little humor in the situation.

"I met with your father this morning," Haydon continued, turning his eyes back to Glenna Ritter. "I've been trying to get in touch with him for days. The bank was robbed in Greasewood—cleaned out. They got thirty thousand dollars."

Wade started. Thirty thousand dollars! It couldn't be.

"Who did it?" Glenna queried, taking a quick breath. "Did they get it back? Daddy has everything he owns invested there!"

"I know he has," Haydon agreed grimly. "I guess your father is pretty worried about it. We know who did it. We're just being careful, that's all. Pretty sure we'll get them pinned down, but we have to make sure we get the thirty thousand, too. They sure cleaned out the bank—even the floor safe nobody was supposed to know about."

"Do you think they've come this way?" the girl asked.

Sheriff John Haydon nodded. "We know they did," he said quietly. "But they won't be going much farther."

Haydon reined his roan past the girl and Ryan, and Wade eyed the lawman carefully. Despite the sheriff's gray hair and the wrinkled smile that had been molded into his face down through the years, Ryan knew Haydon's reputation. The tall, gaunt sheriff wasn't a man to give up easily, nor was he the kind to miss a single bet.

"I'd better keep going," Haydon added. "I just dropped by to water my horse. I helped myself. Hope you don't mind."

Haydon moved his roan slowly up the graveled lane and through the pine gate, then loped off into the heavy underbrush toward the hills. Wade watched him ride away from Rancho Verde and disappear among the twisted junipers, and felt the raw chill of desperation well up inside him.

It didn't make sense. If the sheriff knew who robbed the bank, why hadn't Haydon arrested him on sight? He hadn't said ten thousand dollars, either; the figure was thirty thousand. Rolland and Summers, the two bank employees, had known Wade for years. They *must* have recognized him!

But John Haydon was no fool. A veteran of thirty-odd years as a lawman, the aging sheriff had something up his sleeve. Was he waiting, perhaps, for Wade to lead him to Brett? Or had they arrested Brett already, but hadn't recovered the money? There was an undercurrent of mystery about this man Haydon, and the uncertainty of it all burned deeply inside Wade Ryan.

"You look awfully worried," Glenna said, breaking into his thoughts.

Wade looked down into the bluesness of her eyes. Something stirred inside him whenever the girl spoke, as if a long-dormant emotion within him had suddenly been awakened. He felt a tightness in his chest as he wondered what this girl would think if she knew even a small part of the truth about him.

Bitterly, Wade wondered why he had teamed up with Brett Lane in the first place. But it was too late for regrets now. He and Brett had brewed up their own bitter medicine, and no one was going to drink it for them.

Glenna raised her voice. "Wade, I said you looked worried," she repeated. "What's the matter?"

Ryan shook his head. "Nothing serious. I was just wondering where to look first for my horse. I'd better go alone, too. If there's likely to be trouble up in the hills, you'd be safer here. Mind if I borrow the horse you offered me?"

The girl took a long deep breath, and he felt her eyes searching deeply into his again. "You're up to something, Wade Ryan," she said. "You don't get a horse until you tell me what it is."

His eyes swept away from hers, to a pretended interest in the gracious adobe home Brad Ritter had built for his wife and only daughter. Wade was somewhat surprised at the sudden strength in the girl's voice, and it occurred to him that Glenna Ritter was a young lady no man could fool for long. There was a lot of Brad Ritter's strength in his golden-haired daughter. Ryan found himself thinking of the Rancho Verde owner in a different way than he previously had.

"Can you keep a secret?" he asked, grinning.

"Try me." The warmth moved back into her eves.

"Let's say I know a lot more about the bank robbery than I've let on. I have to go back into the hills to do something about it. Some day I'll tell you the whole story. Now will you let me have a horse and a gun? Those bandits might start playing rough."

"Why didn't you say something to Mr. Haydon?"

"That's part of the same secret," he said, hoping she would accept that. "Will you trust me?"

She stepped inside the adobe house for a moment, then returned, carrying a rifle and a hand-tooled scabbard. Quickly and efficiently, she strapped the scabbard to the saddle of her palomino, then gestured toward the horse.

"Take him," she said. "There's ammunition in the scabbard pouch."

WADE RYAN swung his lean body up into the saddle and lifted the reins. "Thanks," he said.

She was smiling again as she looked up at him. With a look he had never seen in a woman's eyes before, she called out brightly, "Take care of him—and yourself."

As Wade loped away from Rancho Verde, up toward the purple ridges, he knew there were only two courses he could take now. He could find Brett Lane and recover the money he had stolen, then either surrender to John Haydon or make a break for the Mexican border. Mexico was a good hundred miles away, most of the trail over wild, blistering desert country.

He tried to dismiss the thought of breaking through the mountains in the direction of Mexico, yet he knew he could not face John Haydon again. Nor could he spend the next ten years of his life in prison. Above all, Wade Ryan could never face Glenna Ritter again, once she knew he was an outlaw.

First things first, he told himself, as the palomino reached the crest of Angelus Ridge. Here the ridge remained comparatively level, and he urged the powerful gelding forward to the west. Find Brett Lane first, he thought, as the palomino thundered along the rocky half-forgotten trail that followed the ridge.

Stopping only at long intervals to rest the horse, he drove the animal almost to the limit of its endurance, filled with wonder that such a well-bred show horse could possess such stamina.

Finally, as the day drew to a close, he felt the gelding shudder under him, then stumble. Abruptly he drew Glenna's horse to a quick halt, then dismounted.

"Sorry, Goldilocks, or whatever she calls you," he told the horse. "I hated pushing you like that. But we have to catch up to Brett Lane. We robbed a bank, Goldilocks, and we're in a heap of trouble."

Quietly he led the palomino down off the rim, toward the warmer air below the timberline, to avoid chilling the horse while they rested. In the basin of a powdered arroyo, Wade halted the pony and unsaddled him. As he swung the saddle down to the dry sand, the palomino swung its head about sharply and nudged him.

"Hungry, aren't you?" Ryan said. "I bet you're thirsty, too. Sorry, Goldilocks, you don't get a drink until you cool down a bit. You just look around for some grass, and I'll find some water for us."

He unsnapped the reins from the palomino's bit, and looped together a makeshift hobble against the possibility of the horse's wandering off. "You aren't going to like this, either," he said softly. "If I had a pretty boss like you, I'd go running home to her, too."

He drew the ancient Winchester out of its scabbard, and shoved a handful of amunnition

in one of his pockets. In the gathering darkness he moved wearily up the arroyo toward a patch of green grass. There was water nearby. Well, that was one problem solved.

Ryan turned and began walking slowly back toward the hobbled palomino, wondering what step to take next in his pursuit of Brett Lane. Somewhere up here in the hills John Haydon would be continuing his search, too, and the thought troubled him. For the life of him, Wade Ryan couldn't figure out what the crafty old sheriff was up to.

Still wondering, Ryan collected an armful of deadwood and built a fire in the lowest dip of the arroyo. As the flames blazed up, painting the yucca and greasewood a flickering yellow, the idea struck him.

Hurriedly he kicked the fire out, and climbed back up the sandy slope to the crest of Angelus Ridge. There he built another fire, piling dead branches high until the flames leaped wildly into the moonlit night.

I won't have to find Brett if he's within sight of the ridge, Ryan told himself. If Wade knew Brett Lane, the Texan would come for a closer look once he saw the firelight. Then he'd want to know who was on his trail. Trust Brett Lane's inquisitive nature! The logic of it all was childishly simple: if Wade couldn't find Brett Lane, he'd let Brett Lane find him. And he'd be waiting for Brett to come.

Another possibility came to him. John Haydon might drop in to investigate the fire, too. Ryan chuckled deeply to himself, wondering what would happen if both men showed up at the same time. If that happened, a man called Ryan would make tracks out of that vicinity, without wasting any time about it.

At last, with the fire burning furiously in the blue of the spring night, Wade went back down to the arroyo and watered the horse out of his battered hat. Then he moved carefully back up to the ridge, keeping well hidden in the shadows. He slid down in the darkness, his back against a granite boulder, and waited.

The almost interminable night dragged on. Above him the copper moon rolled slowly across the starlit sky, bathing the huge rocks and ragged evergreens with an aura of silvered blue. Wade moved out of the shadows whenever the fire began to die down, building it up with heavy deadwood branches.

ANGELUS RIDGE lay quiet except for the crackling of the fire and the natural sounds of the night. Now and again Wade heard the strange rasping chord of the cicadas and the murmur of fretful wild life somewhere in the darkness.

Then it came, loud as a rifle shot in the night, the crack of a snapping branch beyond the fire. At first Ryan thought it was only the crackling of the dipping flames, but the silence of the night sounds told a different story.

Slowly, keeping to the shadows, Wade rose to his feet, holding the Winchester tightly in his hands. Somewhere beyond the fire he heard the rattle of rolling pebbles, and he strained his eyes against the darkness. There was a movement in the underbrush, no more than forty feet away. Ryan slipped back silently away from the fire, and cut a circle toward the movement.

Spang!

A pistol shot crashed out of the darkness, and the flash hadn't come from the direction of the movement. For a moment there was a loud thrashing of feet in the brush ahead of him. Then suddenly the night air was filled with the sound of gunfire.

Shots were coming from both directions now. Then the shooting stopped as abruptly as it had started. Wade fingered the cold trigger guard of the Winchester and stood silently in the darkness, waiting.

As he watched, a gaunt, crouched figure slipped through the trees ahead of him, making a wide circle away from the flames, his body silhouetted for a moment in golden firelight. From the other side of the clearing a single rifle shot slashed through the night, and the figure slumped to the ground. Then there was silence.

His fire had attracted visitors, all right, Ryan thought. And whoever they were, there seemed to be little love lost between them. For dragging minutes Ryan stood motionless in the dark, waiting for a sound. Finally, as he watched the faint glow of dawn swell up in the east, he heard a muffled groan beyond the dying fire. There were no footsteps, no voices, only the sound of a human being in pain.

Wade crept toward the sound, no more than thirty feet away, choosing his steps carefully

in the half light of the cold dawn. Above him the slim lines of the evergreens took form.

"Don't come any closer!"

The voice cut through the silence of dawn like a knife. Ryan stopped, holding his breath. Ahead of him, half lying against a boulder, was John Rolland, the bank teller.

"What are you doing here?" Ryan asked.

Rolland held a heavy rifle weakly in his hands, and he pointed it directly at Wade Ryan's chest. "The same thing you are!" Rolland grated, his voice thin with pain. "We're both in the same boat. And if I'm dying, you're going to die right with me, like Cal Summers and that friend of yours who just shot me."

Friend? The man who had crumpled to the ground directly in front of Ryan, those long minutes ago, must have been Brett Lane. Sprawled in the sandy leafmold, a few feet from Rolland, lay Cal Summers.

"What do you mean, the same boat?"

"You started the whole thing, Ryan," Rolland accused bitterly. "I haven't much time left, so you may as well know why I'm taking you with me. Cal and I picked up a few dollars around the bank, and we fixed the books our own way. Nobody knew.

"We knew the robbery you sprung would bring on a full-scale audit. Cal and I had nothing to lose. You got about ten thousand. Cal and I cleaned out the floor safe you missed, and left town while the getting was good. Only that crazy sheriff has been running us ragged for a week now, and your partner just ambushed us."

Suddenly all the answers appeared out of nowhere, and Ryan understood why John Haydon hadn't arrested him. Because Cal and John Rolland had left town immediately with their own loot, Ryan hadn't been connected with the robbery at all.

If Summers and Rolland had the twenty thousand with them, and Brett had the other ten thousand, it would be only a matter of time until John Haydon recovered it.

WADE RYAN felt the heavy weight of fear lift from his shoulders. Whatever happened now, if Rolland was dying there would be no living witnesses to the robbery he and Brett had committed.

Somehow, if he could escape the rifle Rolland was aiming at point-blank range, Ryan could return the money to the bank and be in the clear. Above all, he could face Glenna again.

But Rolland was talking again, his high-pitched, grating voice cutting through the stillness on Angelus Ridge. "Just to make it interesting, Ryan, do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to start counting to ten. That gives you a chance at the thirty thousand. If I die before I get to ten, it's yours. If not, I'm going to kill you."

Ryan slid his hand slowly along the cold breech of his Winchester. There was no chance now to draw a bead on Rolland; no chance at all. Rolland would fire the split second Wade moved his rifle. Keep him talking, that was it.

"You picked a crazy time to start playing games, Rolland," he said quietly.

"*One!*"

Rolland never knew what hit him, and later, when Wade Ryan looked back on that cold morning on Angelus Ridge, he swore he aged twenty years when the lone shot rang out.

But when it was all over, Ryan looked to the source of the shot and saw the tall, gaunt frame of Sheriff John Haydon standing there silently in the morning light.

"Don't ever become a lawman, son," he said. "It seems like every time I have to kill a man, I die a dozen deaths myself. But I guess somebody has to do it."

When a man makes a speech like that, there's nothing you can do but change the subject. "Rolland has most of the money in that bag," Ryan told the sheriff. "I guess the rest of it is on the other fellow."

Haydon shook his head. "You sure must've wanted that reward money bad, Wade," he said. "That was a fool stunt, drawing them to a fire. It's a good thing you drew me, too."

For the rest of his days, Sheriff John Haydon would continue to wonder why Wade Ryan turned down the reward money, every cent of it. Old Brad Ritter couldn't understand it either. But with a consolation prize like Brad's golden-haired daughter, Wade Ryan never gave the money another thought.

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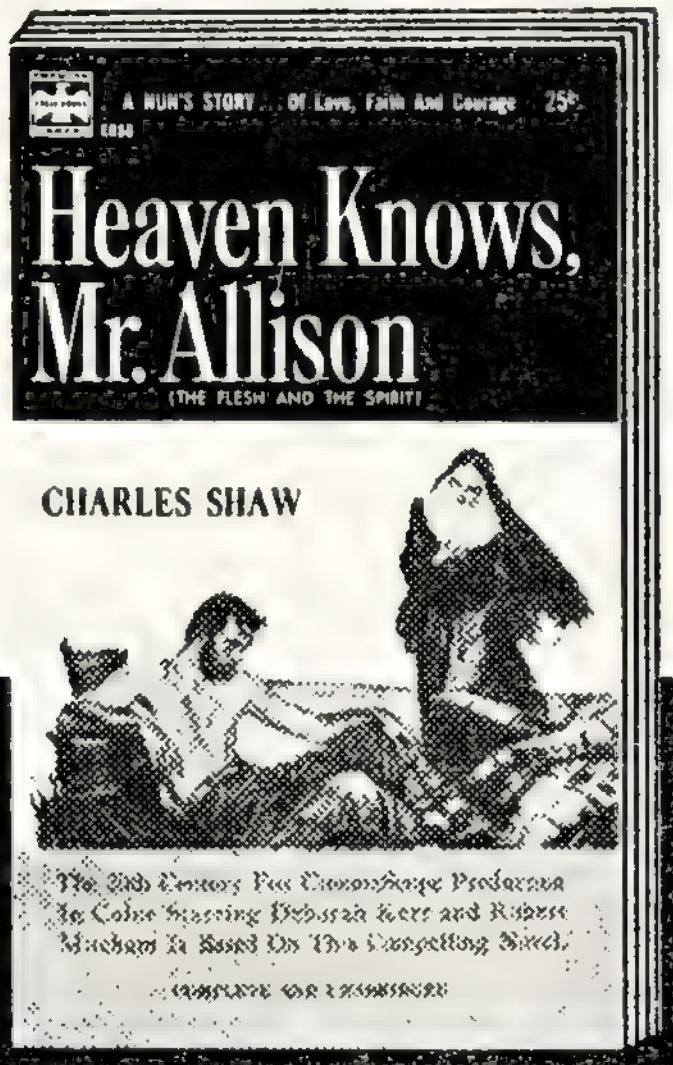

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TRAIL TOWN MARSHAL

By TODHUNTER BALLARD

THE STORY SO FAR: MARSHAL JOE CONDON learns that a respectable citizen, knowing Dexter Springs is almost finished as a trail-end town, has organized the outlaw element to make a quick killing. He also learns that the ex-marshal, CAP LENNOX, and honest saloonkeeper PETE ORTMAN were killed because they stood in the outlaw leader's way. Joe suspects the leader is LLOYD WARNER, father of LUCY, the girl he loves. Actually the leader is HARTFORD HULL, newspaperman and Lucy's fiance. FRENCHY TALBERT takes over Ortman's saloon and, on Hull's orders, pays gamblers in the other places to cheat openly—so the other saloons will be closed down. This causes a gun battle with the crew of Texas cattle baron PAT ALDER. From AL YALE, the gambler caught cheating, Joe learns he got his orders from Talbert. Joe jails them both, to the annoyance of Hull. Hull decides Joe must be killed to stop his interfering.

PART THREE

JOE CONDON came out of the marshal's office, carrying a folded copy of the Sentinel under his arm. He was, at the moment, as thoroughly angry as was possible.

Hartford Hull had devoted the full front page of the paper to the story of the gun fight, the arrest of Yale, the closing of the Western Belle, and the arrest of Frenchy Talbert.

Not only that, but in a two-column editorial he had reviewed everything that had happened since Cap Lennox's murder. But it was the last paragraphs of the editorial which had raised Condon's ire.

Hull wrote:

> Every citizen of Dexter Springs must be aware that this town's whole survival depends upon the herds which come up the long trail from Texas, and on the good will of the men who bring those herds.
>
> Yet our new marshal seems to be doing his best to alienate these very men. I was responsible for his appointment, and I now ask for his removal. If he had his way he will close every establishment south of Railroad Avenue. He will arrest every rider as they come into town. Every member of the Council, with the exception of our mayor, agrees with me.
>
> I therefore call upon all citizens to help, to take up the cause. I demand a new deal in the marshal's office. I demand the arrest of the deputy who caused two deaths yesterday and who, if not checked, can well cause more. To arms! This is no time for men to hesitate. If our government has failed to function, then it is time for a committee of citizens to take over the duties . . .

Condon marched down the street and into the newspaper office. Hull was not there. The printer wiped his mouth with the back of an ink-stained hand and spat into a battered can.

"I haven't seen him all morning, Marshal."

Condon sensed that the man was laughing at him behind the mask of his dirty face. He turned on his heel and left the office. It occurred to him that Hull might be hiding, but then he dismissed the thought with a shrug. Hartford Hull, whatever else his faults, was not a coward.

Condon passed a dozen men on the street. They all spoke to him, but there was a definite change in their attitude, a reserved quality which had not existed before, as if they were holding themselves withdrawn until they could make up their minds.

He came to the hardware store which Mayor Jerome Boyce operated, and went in. A woman was buying a coil of small rope and talking vehemently to the mayor as she completed her purchase. She turned and saw Condon, and the flow of her words stopped abruptly.

She accepted her change and scurried from the store as if the air had suddenly become unbreathable. Boyce watched her in silence, then turned to Condon. Surprisingly, he winked.

Condon moved over to the counter and laid down the paper. "I suppose you've seen this?"

The little mayor nodded. "Hartford is a good writer. He makes the words go together real nice."

"Look," said Condon, "I appreciate your backing me, but you seem to be about the only one who is. You're in business in this town, and you have to live with these people." He reached up to unpin the badge from his shirt.

Boyce said, "I didn't think you were a quitter, son."

Condon stopped. He stared at the little man, then slowly let his hand fall to his side. "Say that again."

Boyce smiled, a small, twisting smile. "I've lived a mite longer than you have," he said, "and I've probably seen a much larger number of people. People get stirred up; that's Hartford's job, to stir them up. I'll bet he sold more papers this morning than he ever will again."

Condon said, "He's playing with fire."

"Sure he is, but he isn't the one who'll get burned."

"Then you think he wrote that merely to sell papers?"

"And advertising. Don't forget that a lot of the men south of the tracks carry ads in his paper. They figure that Pete Ortman and Frenchy Talbert were big, powerful men. If Ortman can be killed and Talbert arrested and closed, they don't know what will happen to them."

"Then you don't think Hull was ordered to write as he did?"

Boyce squinted at him over his square, steel-rimmed glasses. "Ordered by whom?"

Condon did not know. He certainly did not want to mention Warner's name. He said, "It doesn't matter. The thing is, he did write it, he did stir up this town as it's never been stirred up before, and it's going to make things twice as hard when Pat Alder rides in."

Boyce said, "Why don't you ride out and talk to Alder? He was riled yesterday. He

might have calmed down some by today."

Joe Condon did not believe this. He had known Pat Alder too long to believe that anything would ever calm the rancher down. But he could not well refuse to try.

"I hate to leave town. I hate to let Blankton step out of the office onto the street alone. Some fool will probably take a shot at him if he does."

Boyce shrugged. "You can't be everyplace, Joe. Just tell Blankton to watch himself."

"I already have. He won't listen. He thinks someone will take it that he's afraid."

The little storekeeper sighed. "The trouble with men is pride. Half of them would keep clear of trouble if it were not for their pride. Well, you and I can't change that. We'll just have to do the best we can."

LEAVING the store, Joe Condon had a warm feeling for the little man. Not since Cap Lennox died had he felt like this for anyone in Dexter Springs. He realized now something which he had not suspected before, that Boyce and the dead marshal had certain traits in common. They were honest, and they did not back away from anything.

He debated going back to the marshal's office to warn Blankton again to stay off the street, then changed his mind. Instead, he turned directly toward the livery stable where he kept his horse. He had almost reached the runway entrance when Lucy Warner came around the corner of the side street beyond the building.

He stopped, waiting for her to come up, then said casually, "It's nice to see you. It turns a bad morning into a good one."

She gave him no answering smile. Her face remained grave, her eyes shadowed. "You've seen the paper?"

He said, "Of course." All the levity was gone from his voice.

"Have you talked to Hartford?"

He shook his head.

"I've been trying to find him." Her voice had gained an edge of anger. "I simply can't believe that he did it."

Condon's shrug was slight but expressive. "Sometimes we aren't our own bosses."

"What do you mean by that?"

He hesitated. He had no desire to discuss Hull with anyone, especiall this girl Hull was supposed to marry. He said, "I guess I didn't mean much of anything. I have to ride out and try to talk some sense into Pat Alder's hard head."

She said without thinking, "I wish I could go with you. I've never seen a trail herd on the move. For that matter, I've never seen very much of this country."

"Why don't you?" He spoke on impulse. "I can get a buckboard. We'll be back before dark."

She started to refuse. She knew instinctively that Hull would not approve, but the very thought of Hull and her anger with him made her decision.

"Why not? But we'll have to stop by the house for a few minutes."

He nodded, and they moved on into the stable. After his first impulse, he was already regretting the invitation. It would be no pleasure to be with her, knowing that she belonged to Hull, that he must be careful what he said.

But he found, as he swung the buckboard into the broad hoof-marked trace which led south-eastward, that there was satisfaction in just riding at her side, feeling her light body jounce against him as the wheels struck a hump in the road, and listening to her talk, easy and unrestrained.

"I like it." She was staring out across the rolling hills. "It's funny, but I've hardly been out of the Springs since we moved here. Hartford says there's noplace to go. It never occurs to him that it's fun merely to ride in the sunshine, merely to be alive."

He laughed.

"Did you and Kern Alder ride a lot?" she asked.

He turned to look at her then, to tell her that whatever had been between Kern and himself was long gone. "We were crazy kids," he said. "We thought nothing of riding a hundred miles to a dance."

She sighed. "It's strange how different people's lives are. I don't think I've been to more than four or five dances in my life. Father never approved, and Hartford thinks they're a waste of time."

"I'll take you," he said, again without thinking, "next time the firemen throw their dance."

She gave him a small smile. "Do you think it would be wise?"

He knew a sudden welling urge to catch her in his arms, to hold her with his strength, to force his mouth against hers, to tell her that he loved her as Hartford Hull could never love her. But some inner conscience which was stronger even than his desire held him silent for a long moment.

Then he said, his voice emotionless, "Sometimes I tire of being wise."

She sensed the strain beneath his words and was startled by her own awareness. She tried to shift the conversation quickly. "What will you do when you leave the Springs? Surely you won't be content to wear a marshal's badge all your life."

He looked off across the hills, steadying his thoughts. No one had ever stirred him as this girl did, yet even with the violence of his desire riding through him, he sensed her quiet depth, her steadfastness and loyalty. This was a person with whom you could plan an ordered life, future rich with companionship and common enjoyment. His feeling for Kern had been surface sensation, wild moments of desire, and then deep anger at her fickleness.

"I want a ranch," he said, "something that's mine, that I've built myself. I want it north somewhere, in new country without the feuds and bitterness which still linger in Texas from the war. I guess what I'm looking for is peace. I've seen a lot of fighting and I'm tired of it. Fighting always means defeat for someone."

There was more feeling in his words than she had ever heard there before, and she looked at him with new understanding, seeing a man who had gone to war a boy, who had come back to find no peace.

"I want a place to raise my family." He was speaking now more to himself than to her. He had never really put his hope for the future into words before.

"Your family?"

He flushed, his laugh a small boy's embarrassed sound. "I suppose every man wants a family, someone to carry on his name, although a lot of them won't admit it."

"With Kern?"

He exploded then. "Definitely not with Kern. She has her points—beauty, brains and a ruthless drive—but trying to live with Kern is like trying to ride an unbroken horse. Just when you think you know exactly where she's going, she changes direction. No. When I marry, if I ever do, it will be to some girl who loves the land, who will work and put up with hardships and disappointments and bad times to help build something permanent. I want someone I can talk to, who will want to share the problems and help make the decisions."

Lucy smiled. "That sounds wonderful. So few men consider that women have brains enough to do more than cook and wash dishes and sweep the floor."

There was a deep hunger in her tone. They looked at each other, and suddenly, without a word being spoken, she was in his arms and he was kissing her fiercely. But after the first passionate response she was motionless, not fighting him, but not returning his caress.

He pulled away. "Lucy."

"Please. I've got to think."

"What's there to think about? This had to happen. I guess. I love you. I've loved you almost from the first moment I saw you. It's what kept me in town. It's why I haven't pulled out before now."

"There's Hartford."

He felt a great violence, a surging desire to say, "To hell with Hartford. To hell with everything but us." But he checked himself, knowing by instinct that a wrong word at this moment might well alter her mood. At least he had hope. He had waited without hope for a long time; he could wait a little longer with it.

He glanced around the horizon, steadying himself, giving the girl a moment to collect her self-possession. He saw the dust kicked up far behind them by two riders, and wondered idly who they were.

If he had not been so engrossed in her he might have noticed them before. They had been following him ever since he had left the marshal's office.

DEPUTY BLANKTON was restless. He stood at the window of the marshal's office staring moodily out at the street. He too had read Hartford Hull's editorial. Curiously, he did not feel the deep rage at the newspaperman which had been Joe Condon's

reaction, but he did imagine that people all over town were thinking that he was hiding, cooped up here in the city hall.

Phil Moore and Blankton's younger brother were out on the street. He wished that one of them would come in and relieve him. To hell with what Condon had said; he was not going to stay out of sight. He would show the town that no matter what they thought of him, he was not afraid of anyone.

Finally he could stand the inactivity no longer. He called through the window to a boy, and sent him in search of either his brother or Phil Moore. Moore came in half an hour later, looking at him inquiringly.

"I've been in here long enough," Blankton said flatly. "You stay and play nursemaid to the prisoners."

"But Condon said—"

"Condon isn't God."

Phil Moore was troubled. He did not actually like Blankton, but he had associated himself with the older man in his own mind, feeling that they were put upon, that they had both gotten a poor deal.

"I don't know. The town is fairly stirred up. Half a dozen gamblers tried to ride me awhile ago. I just walked away."

"I won't walk away," Blankton told him darkly. "When the rats see me they'll run for their holes."

He turned without another word and vanished through the doorway. Phil Moore moved over to the window and watched him stride around the corner. Then he went back to the desk. A voice from the jail wing called his name. He hesitated for a moment, then went to the grille which separated the office from the jail corridor, and unlocked it.

"What's the matter?"

Frenchy Talbert was in the end cell, the one in which Sam Seller had been killed. "Come here a minute. I want to talk to you."

Phil Moore did not move, and Talbert said in a mocking tone, "What's the trouble, are you afraid?"

Moore came forward. He swaggered a little as he came, and his laugh sounded empty. "Why should I be afraid of a man who's locked up?"

"I won't be locked up for long."

"That's what you say."

Talbert was annoyed. He was used to having people like Moore try to curry his favor.

"Listen, kid. You haven't many brains, but use the few you have. You saw the paper this morning. Condon is through, and that fool mayor who's supporting him is through. I have friends. If you don't believe it, why do you think I could move into the Western Belle when Pete was killed?"

In spite of himself, Phil Moore was impressed. All of his short life he had taken orders from people in authority, and he was deeply worried by the uncertainty of Condon's position.

The swagger was gone from his voice now. In its place was a grudging respect. "I never did anything to you, Frenchy."

Talbert smiled to himself. He was an old hand at pushing venal public officials. "You never did anything for me, either. I've got to get out of here."

"No." The very idea horrified Phil Moore. "Condon would kill me."

"Look," said Talbert. "It's only a matter of hours until Condon won't be marshal any more. And Blankton's going to get killed on the street; you can be sure of that."

Phil Moore didn't say anything.

"Who'll be marshal then?"

Phil Moore thought about it. After all, if Blankton and Condon were out of the way, he would be next in line. "I don't know." His mouth was cotton dry.

"You can be, if you play it smart. All you have to do is stand close to the door. I'll reach out and grab your gun. No one is going to blame you if you open the cell when you have a gun lined on you."

"I'd look like a fool."

Talbert said, "You'll look like a worse fool if you don't. Who do you think runs this town, anyhow? You read the paper this morning. Why do you think Hull wrote as he did?"

Phil Moore did not know.

"Because he was told to. When a man like Hull takes orders, what about you?"

Still Moore could think of nothing to say.

"Here." Talbert reach in his inside pocket. "At least Condon didn't take my money. I have five hundred here." He held it up for Moore to see, careful not to extend it be-

tween the bars. "This is only the first payment. There's a lot more where this came from. If you play it right you can be the biggest man in Dexter Springs."

PHIL MOORE was only twenty-one. He had never in his life had a hundred dollars in his hands at any one time. His eyes lit hungrily. He wavered, then slowly advanced toward the cell door, one hand extended. Talbert watched him like a rattler watching a desert mouse.

When the extended hand was within inches of the bars, Talbert's hand shot through. His fingers locked about Phil Moore's wrist and, with surprising strength, he jerked the deputy against the bars with a force which nearly stunned Moore. The deputy's head struck against the grille.

For an instant he stood there, and in that time Frenchy's left hand snaked the heavy gun from the holster. The next moment it was pointing at Moore's stomach. Talbert's glittering eyes were only the bars' width from the deputy's.

"All right, open up."

Phil Moore stared at him, a protest growing on his lips. But the protest was never uttered. His eyes fell before those of the saloon man, for he had read the resolution there. He knew that Frenchy Talbert would shoot him as dispassionately as he would step on an ant.

He unlocked the door. Talbert was through it with the quickness of a cat. He brought up the heavy gun and ruthlessly slammed it down across Phil Moore's head. Moore dropped without a sound and Talbert stood over him for a full minute, looking down.

"Chump," he said viciously. Then he crossed to the opposite cell and released Yale.

The gambler bubbled with thanks, but Talbert said coldly, "Get out of town. If you're caught again I'll have you killed."

The man's face went blank. He stood for an instant without speaking. "I hope they hang you," he said, and, turning, bolted out of the corridor.

Talbert gave him no second thought. He stuffed Moore's gun into his waistband and walked casually from the office. On Second Street he met two men who knew him. They stopped and stared. He nodded, a sarcastic smile on his dark, handsome face, and walked by them with no apparent concern.

At the corner of Railroad Avenue he looked up and down its dusty length, and saw Blankton's tall figure a full block away. For the first time since he had left the jail he hesitated. Then he darted across the tracks to lose himself in the maze of alleys to the south.

Blankton did not see him. Blankton's progress along the street which divided the upper part of town from the saloon district had been slow and studied. At each place he had turned in, entered the long, dark, smoky rooms, walked as far as the end of the bars to give a long, examining look, then had deliberately turned, presenting his back as if inviting an attack.

He was not, as a general thing, a particularly daring man, and each step he took in leaving was a painful uncertainty. As yet nothing had happened, but each time he entered a new saloon it took more will power. He knew that the news of what he was doing had passed ahead of him down the row.

He reached Kirk Aminstead's place. It was the last place in the whole town in which he would have expected trouble. Kirk was as near a friend as Blankton could claim among the men along the south side of Railroad Avenue.

He turned in and found Kirk behind his own bar. He had barely reached the high, scarred counter before his sixth sense warned him of tension. The room was fairly small, not half the size of the Western Belle, yet there were more men present than he had seen in any other saloon that morning.

He recognized most of them without knowing their names. They were gamblers from a dozen spots along the street, hangers on who, without visible means of support, somehow managed to continue making the Springs their headquarters.

He looked at Kirk and asked, "What is this?"

The saloon man refused to meet his eyes. He bent to get a bottle, saying in a tone which carried the words only to Blankton's ears, "You shouldn't have come in here, Carl. Get out if you can."

Blankton turned around, his cold eyes

watching the faces which made a kind of wall before him. "I'll take six of you with me." There was no boasting in his voice. Now that his moment of destiny had caught up with him, Carl Blankton lost the fear which had driven him for most of his adult life.

HE KNEW that he was going to die, and strangely the very knowledge wiped away his fear. He was perfectly calm, detached. He stood there selecting the six men. Contrary to general practice, he carried six loads in his Colt's.

When he had made the selection, he said mockingly, "Start the ball, boys. We can't all live forever."

They watched him. This was a trap, a planned thing, yet they hesitated to spring it. They had had the courage of numbers, but now, under the flat threat of Blankton's eyes, each man stood alone, certain that one of the bullets in Blankton's gun was meant for him.

One after another they turned away, some clustering at the card tables, some lining up against the bar. The last three left facing him, as if realizing their loneliness at the same time, suddenly headed for the rear door, crowding each other in their hurry.

Blankton laughed, the tautness running out of him, and his jeering voice cut at them across the heavy silence. "Rats. If I see any of you in town after tonight, you die."

He backed away then, still too cautious to turn, as he had in the other saloons, working slowly toward the street door. He never made it, for Frenchy Talbert had come around the corner from the alley and reached the door in time to see the last of the play.

He drew Phil Moore's gun. When less than ten feet separated him from the retreating man, he shot Blankton squarely in the middle of the back.

At once there was turmoil within the small room, but it stopped as Talbert stepped across the body of the man he had just shot. He still held the warm gun in his hand.

His voice was edged when he said, "The street is open, boys. The Western Belle will be doing business within the hour."

He turned then and went out onto Railroad Avenue, with a dozen men following him. By the time he reached the corner and paused to unlock the big saloon, the group had swelled to nearly a hundred.

Watching from the safety of the railroad station waiting room, Hartford Hull had seen the full play. He smiled to himself. His bunch were back in control without his even having to show his hand. Blankton was dead, and Joe Condon would not return to town alive. There was no one to stop them now. Dexter Springs would fall into their laps like an overripe apple.

THE Box A herd was spread out for miles. To Lucy Warner, who had only seen cattle in pens or as they were driven up the town streets, the sight was breathtaking.

It was still early in the season, and not many herds had preceded the Box A. Some grass still remained along the trail. The moving herd was nearly three miles across as the riders let their charges advance slowly, feeding as they went.

The second section of the herd was less than half a day behind now, so that the joint crews had mingled and the animals would be driven into the shipping pens in a continuous stream.

Joe Condon was surprised that they were so close to town. The buckboard had covered less than ten miles before they picked up the point riders and learned that Pat Alder was at the headquarter camp two miles away.

Both men on point were cool and reserved in their greeting, although Joe had known them both for a long time. He realized that the breach between him and the Box A was very wide. So he was not surprised, when he pulled up to the chuck wagon, to have Pat Alder look at him as if they had never met, and then turn away.

What did surprise him was the fact that Kern Alder was present. He guessed that she had ridden out from town that morning, and this was confirmed by the sight of a newspaper tossed on the ground which he recognized as that day's Sentinel.

Kern came forward as he stepped down and offered Lucy his hand, and her voice was sharp, commanding as she called after her father, "Lucy Warner is here. Come and make her welcome."

Pat Alder could be brusque with men, but it was not in him to be rude to a woman. He

came back, pointedly ignoring Condon, and said to Lucy, "*You* are welcome, ma'am. I'm glad you came out. You can tell your father that we'll reach the pens with the first cattle sometime tomorrow, and that three days should see them all delivered."

Lucy was looking around her. "I've never seen so many animals in my life."

Pat's mouth twisted. "I'll be glad to see the last of them. You can get real tired of a steer in three thousand miles."

Kern laughed. "And six months from now you'll be ready to bring up another herd."

"Not here." His hard eyes had settled on Joe Condon, and there was a threat in his voice. "We're coming in armed," he said, "and you'd better have that murdering deputy out of town if you don't want him hung."

The cook and helper had stopped to listen, and from the tail of his eye Condon saw them edge closer. Had the girls not been present he would have suspected that this could develop into deep trouble. But he knew the rancher well enough to be certain that Alder would not allow anything to start while they were there, no matter how great his rage.

He said, "You've known me a long time, Pat. You know I don't like killing, and I don't like trouble, and there isn't going to be any trouble at the Springs as long as I'm wearing this star." He said it quietly, with no boasting, but with an edged warning in his voice.

They glared at each other. It was not the first time that he and Pat two men with strong personalities and native stubbornness, had differed.

"Your crew will be treated like any other crew. They will take off their guns the minute they ride into town, and they will leave them off until they ride out. That's final."

"And if we don't?"

"I'll personally jail every one I catch. This game is for keeps, Pat. You'll have to kill me to stop me."

Lucy Warner had never seen Condon like this. She glanced at Kern Alder, her eyes full of worry. Kern was watching the two men, a small pleased smile on her face, almost as if she were egging them on, urging them to fight for her entertainment.

But Lucy did not share her enjoyment. She took a step forward, saying to Pat Alder, "If you won't listen to him, listen to me. There are a lot of decent people in Dexter Springs, people who regretted the death of your man as much as you do. Don't turn our town into a shambles. Joe is doing his best to handle a bad situation. Help him; don't fight him."

Alder turned to look at her, and he came as near rudeness as he could with a woman. He said, "You should try to straighten things out. Condon is your man; make him have some sense. If he'll turn this Blankton over to us, I promise you there will be no trouble, that no gun will be worn in town, that not one of my riders will enter a saloon or even stay in town overnight."

She glanced at Condon. His face looked as if it had been carved out of granite. He said evenly, "You know I can't do that, Pat. You wouldn't give up a man of your crew to anyone, not even if he were the worst murderer alive."

Alder grunted.

"And Blankton isn't that. He was shooting in self-defense. The real people to blame are Frenchy Talbert and that gambler Yale. I have them in jail."

"Give them to me."

"I can't do that either. I'm a law officer. If I can prove anything against them, I'll send them to prison." He was talking to empty air. Pat Alder had turned and walked away.

Kern said in an easy tone, "You're wasting your time, Joe."

He gave her a weary shrug.

"You might as well go back to town," she said. "In fact, I'll ride back with you. My horse threw a shoe coming out, and he's a little lame."

Condon said stiffly, "I'm surprised that anyone from the Box A would ride with me."

She laughed at him and turned to Lucy. "You're lucky you have your handsome editor and don't have to put up with this bull-headed cowboy. I thought I might marry him once. In fact, if worst comes to the worst I'll probably marry him after all. But you have to understand Joe, know how to handle him."

CONDON knew that his face was red beneath the heavy tan. At the moment he could have strangled Kern with his two hands. He swung and walked away.

Behind him he heard Kern say, "Men are all alike. You have to handle them. The minute you treat one as an equal you've lost your power over them." She laughed again and came toward the buckboard, with Lucy Warner following uncertainly.

They drove in silence, moving carefully through the scattered herd so as not to stampede them. The steers were being pushed faster than they had been on the trail. It took almost two hours before they passed the outflung point riders. Condon judged that they were not over five miles, at most, from the pens.

There was little time for him to do anything. The showdown was plodding up the trail behind him, not fast, but moving with relentless steadiness.

They had no warning. They were driving through a break in the row of sand hills, where a small creek had cut a path across the rolling terrain, when two riders pulled clear of a thicket of cottonwood to their right and were on each side of the team before he realized that anything was wrong.

Both men had their neckerchiefs up across the lower part of their faces, and his first thought was of a holdup. He almost laughed, thinking of the very small sum of money he carried. One rider had grabbed the reins and was holding the nervous team. The other rode to the side of the buckboard.

"All right, Marshal, step down." Not until then did Condon realize that the masked men knew who he was. Both girls had been staring at the men in uncertain surprise.

Involuntarily Lucy said, "No," and started to stand up. The man on the horse beside the buckboard reached over with his free hand and pushed her back into the seat.

"Sit down, act sensible, and neither of you girls will get hurt. We just want a little talk with the marshal."

Condon got to his feet. Had he been alone, he would have tried for his gun. But, with the girls in the wagon, he made no effort toward it. Kern Alder chose this moment to seize the lines which Condon had dropped. The attention of both men was centered on the marshal, and neither was watching her.

She bent forward carefully, lifted the lines, and caught them in her left hand. She edged her right down along the dangling ends. Suddenly she rose up, yelling at the horses, bringing over the ends of the lines to snap smartly across their backs.

They jumped, startled, jerking free of the grip the rider before them had on the left horse's bridle, rearing so that their pawing front hoofs knocked his mount sidewise.

The scared horse went to his knees, throwing his rider over his head. The team plunged on, one hoof striking the fallen man's head, killing him instantly. The second man brought his horse around with a curse. Kern was still standing, screeching at the top of her voice, as the buckboard jounced over the rough ground.

Behind them, the second man was spurring desperately, his gun raised. He fired once, the bullet cutting over their heads. The second shot caught Kern in the back, and she would have fallen from the careening wagon had not Condon reached out to grab an arm and pull her free of the spinning wheels.

He lifted her already limp body across him into Lucy's lap, shouting, "Hold her."

Then, ignoring the racing horses and the dangling lines, he twisted. His first shot struck the following horse in the head and the animal somersaulted in the air, pitching its rider to the ground

Condon dropped the gun and leaned far forward to catch the lines. Then, straining backward with all his might, he tried to check the frightened horses. But they had traveled a good quarter of a mile before he got them under control.

He swung down then, not trusting them. He led them to a stand of cottonwood along the creek and tied them before he turned to the wagon. Kern was entirely limp in Lucy's arms now.

In answer to his unspoken question, Lucy said in a shaken voice, "I think she's dead."

Surprisingly, Kern said in a weak voice, "Not yet."

Condon reached up and lifted her down as gently as he could, shocked at the amount of blood that stained her dress. The wound in her back was close under the left shoulder blade, and he could not see how the heavy bullet could have missed her heart.

"We've got to get her to the doctor, quick."

HER eyes opened, and there was the barest trace of the old smile he had known so well. "Kiss me, Joe."

He kissed her gently, his lips just brushing hers, and she said against them, "No doctor. I won't last a mile. This is it, Joe."

He had trouble with words; his voice muscles were stiff. "Sure you will."

Her head moved slightly and she saw Lucy. "He's about the best there is, and I treated him rough. Make up for it, will you?" She coughed then, there was a sudden rush of blood from her mouth, and she was dead.

Condon stared down at her, not believing it, feeling empty now, completely washed out. She had been a part of his life, she had left marks on him, and, with all her selfishness, her lack of real feeling for others, she had still offered him something which he would never quite find in anyone else.

Slowly he eased her light body to the ground, for a moment unable to think clearly, to decide what to do. It was Lucy who took over with a briskness foreign to her, as if she had gained a certain decisive quality from the dead girl.

"Her father will have to know."

"Of course."

"And those men—are they dead?"

He thought of them with rising anger. The whole thing had been so fruitless. If Kern had not tried to drive away, she would still be alive. And then it hit him with full suddenness. She had saved him. She had given her life for him.

They drove slowly back to where the gunman's horse had gone down. The man had dragged himself to one side. He sat up as Condon jumped down, hard faced, his gun in his hand, and walked forward.

"My leg's broken." The voice was whining, pleading.

Condon looked at him unmoved. "Who hired you?"

The man turned sullen. Condon retrieved his gun from the grass fifty feet away. As he turned, he saw two riders in the southern distance, and guessed they were the men who had been on point, riding over to investigate.

It was a silent, stony-faced group which rode to where Pat Alder still sat beside the chuckwagon. He stood up and moved forward. He stood looking at his daughter in a kind of dazed, unbelieving way as if his mind refused to credit what his eyes told him. Then he looked at Condon.

But it was Lucy Warner who told him what had happened. She took his gnarled, rope-broken hands in both her own, and told of his daughter's courage, of how she had driven the team against the mounted man, of how she had saved her and Condon's lives.

When she had finished, Pat Alder lifted his daughter's body in his arms and, carrying her over, laid her on a blanket beside the fire. Then he walked to the killer who had been brought in by the point riders.

The man sat, his broken leg stretched out before him, his sullen face gray with pain and fear, his eyes on the ground. He had no hope. He knew already that in the minds of every one of these rock-faced men his fate was sealed.

He stared up at Pat Alder now, saying in a shaky voice, "I didn't mean to kill your girl. We were going to let her go. We wanted him." He nodded to Condon.

"Who hired you?" Alder could barely control his words.

"Why should I tell you? I'm dead anyway."

"You're dead." There was no feeling in Alder's words. "But you'll tell me before you die, or there won't be an unbroken bone in your body."

Sweat made an unhealthy sheen across the pallor of the man's face. "What do I owe Frenchy? I wasn't even paid."

Condon said, "It wasn't Frenchy who hired you. He's in jail. Who *did* hire you? Who's behind Talbert?"

The man's puzzlement was genuine. "There's no one behind Talbert. He's the boss, as far as I know. I went and talked to him through the jail window."

Condon turned his back. There was no way to pierce the blanket of secrecy which seemed to surround Talbert's actions. In his own mind he had decided to beat the information out of the saloon man.

They buried Kern beside the small creek. Lucy said timidly that she should be taken to the little graveyard in town. Pat Alder looked at her, and his voice was harsh.

"I wouldn't have her in that stinking town. I wouldn't bury a dog there."

Afterward he stood beside Condon, not speaking for a long minute. Then he said, "She was a good person."

He spoke as if he wanted confirmation, as if he were not quite sure in his own mind.

"She was the best. There was no one like her." Joe Condon said it honestly.

"This Talbert that you have in jail—give him to me."

Condon said steadily, "I'll handle him, Pat."

Alder did not seem to hear.

"We'll be in," he said. "You'd better go on ahead. I wouldn't want Miss Lucy around when it happens."

CONDON knew he was talking about the killer. He nodded. Even if he had had any impulse to try to save the man's life, there was nothing he could do. Most of the Box A was gathered around the fire, silently watching him talk to Alder.

He turned and went over to where Lucy stood, saying in a low voice, "We'd better go."

She understood. He could see it in her eyes. She said nothing, realizing that there was nothing to be said. They drove off in silence, moving back through the vast herd. The sun was well down in the west and he wanted to get clear of the cattle before darkness.

Neither of them spoke, yet there was an awareness between them which made the air strained and uneasy. It was as if both knew that there were things which had to be said, but were not yet ready to face them.

Once clear of the cattle, he whipped the horses into a trot and they bounced across the uneven ground. The lights of the town come up before them as they mounted the last rise of swelling hills and dropped down toward the railroad, two miles away.

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They came in at the southeast end, since the trail led to the cattle pens and loading chutes, and crossed Railroad Avenue on Sixth. Out of habit, Joe Condon looked down the long wide street. Then he froze, jerking the jaded team to an abrupt halt.

Five blocks away, the lights of the Western Belle blazed out through its windows. Before the saloon was a crowd of men, reaching almost to the railroad tracks. Even at this distance he could hear their shouts and laughter.

Lucy was staring past his shoulder. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," he said grimly, not suspecting that the celebration was because of his supposed death. "But I'll find out."

He whipped up the team and drove quickly across to the Denver Street entrance to the livery and into the runway. The barn man came forward as Condon helped the girl down.

He said, "Marshal, where've you been? There's hell to pay."

Condon looked at him. "What's happened?"

"Carl Blankton's dead. Talbert is out of jail and has reopened the Western Belle. Everyone on this side of the tracks is scared. They're talking about hiding under the beds."

Condon turned to the girl. "I'll have Bob drive you home." He nodded to the barn man, then, without waiting for an answer, turned and headed quickly for the door.

Lucy stopped him just before he vanished into the street. "Joe, be careful."

He came into the marshal's office to find it dark. A voice halted him as he entered the door, a frightened voice. "Stay where you are."

He said sharply, "It's Joe Condon," and heard a long-drawn breath.

"Joe, it's you." There was relief, amazement, unbelief blended.

He said impatiently, "Of course it's me. Light a light. What the hell is going on here, anyhow?"

He heard a man scratched, and saw Phil Moore outlined in the tiny flame. Then the big lamp's wick caught, dissolving the shadows from the room. It showed him Harvey Blankton at the open window, a shotgun in his hands. Phil Moore was just turning from the lamp, after replacing the chimney.

"Have you heard? Carl's dead. Talbert shot him in the back," Phil said.

Condon nodded. "How did Talbert get out?"

Phil Moore touched the side of his head, where a swelling bruise showed through his thin hair. "I got too close to the door. He grabbed my gun and got the keys."

Condon stared at him bleakly. "All right, tell it the way it happened."

Phil Moore tried to stare him down, and failed. His eyes fell away. He was scared, shaken. In fumbling words he told exactly what had happened.

Condon cursed him. "I should kill you, but I haven't got time. Now, what's happened since?"

It was Harvey Blankton who said, "Everything. Talbert immediately reopened the Western Belle, and all the toughs gathered around him. Then he sent word here that if either Phil or I tried to cross Railroad Avenue, we were dead. In the middle of the afternoon a rumor went through town that you had been killed, and when you didn't show up by dark we believed it. What else could we do?" He sounded a little guilty, as if he feared that Condon would blame him, along with Phil Moore.

Condon said, "There's nothing you could have done that I know of. Have you seen the mayor?"

"He and Hull were here earlier. Both of them told us to stay out of sight and not stir things up. I don't know where they are now, but people were gathering at the mayor's house."

"All right. Stay here. Put your lights out, and if they try to come after you, slip out the back door. You aren't going to help things by getting yourselves killed."

He was gone almost before they could answer, heading down Second at a run. He saw the blaze of lights long before he reached the house, and realized that it was full of people and there were men in the yard.

HE WAS challenged as he reached the the gate, and stopped, calling his name. The shock of hearing Condon's voice was almost too much for Harford Hull, for

it was he standing in the darkness, a shotgun in his hands.

All evening it had amused him to play his double part, to sit in the council and debate ways and means of protecting the people north of the tracks from the mob prowling between the saloons south of Railroad Avenue.

He knew that there would be no real attack, since it was not part of his plan to destroy the town, but the more he could make these people believe their danger the more he could control their actions.

In mid-afternoon he had volunteered to cross the street for a conference with Talbert, ostensibly to get the saloon man to call off his wolves, actually to set their plans in the privacy of Talbert's office. It was then he leaned that Frenchy had put two men on the marshal's trail, with orders to follow him wherever he went and ambush him.

Talbert had not known, when he gave the order, that Condon would leave town, but that happening had played directly into their hands. Hull returned to the mayor with the rumor that Condon was dead.

The news had shaken Boyce, and for the first time the little man had lost part of his nerve. He was aware that in neither Phil Moore nor Harvey Blankton did he have the strength to control the situation.

It was then that he had called some forty merchants and their wives to his home, forming a kind of citizens' committee for their joint protection. He had appointed Hull as the leader, relying on the man's past military experience.

It took Hull only a few moments to recover from his shock. His voice was warm when he came forward, saying quickly, "Joe, you're alive! We heard you were dead."

"I'm not." Condon brushed past him, hurrying up the walk with Hull at his heels. "But the men who tried to kill me are dead, and they shot Kern Alder by accident."

The news jarred Hull, but he was jarred more when he stepped inside and heard Condon say to the mayor, "You can stop worrying. Pat Alder is on his way up with twenty riders. As soon as they get here I'll clean out that bunch around the Western Belle and close

[*Turn page*]

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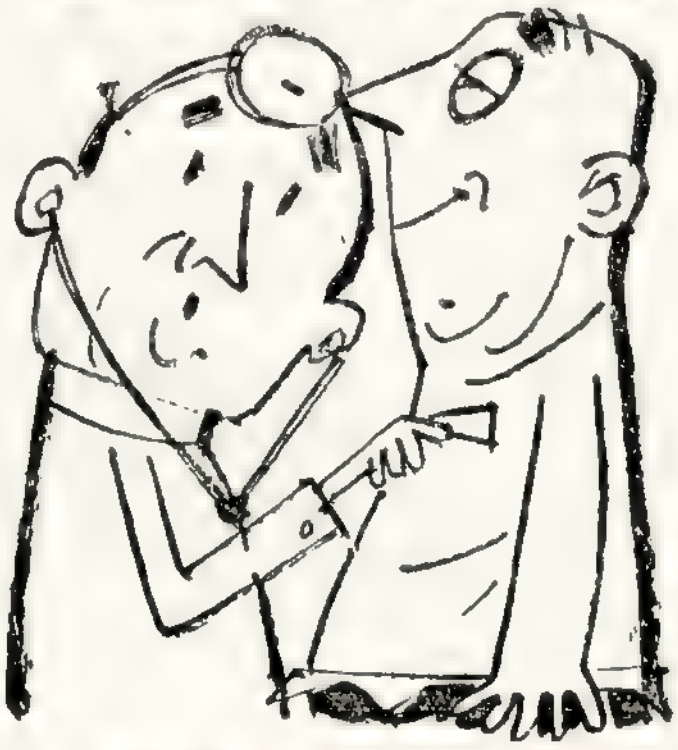

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every saloon along Railroad Avenue."

Hull said in a disbelieving voice, "You mean Alder will fight with you, after the trouble you two had?"

Condon turned to look at him. "Those two men Talbert sent after me killed Alder's daughter."

There was silence in the crowded room, an air of stupefying shock. Few of these people had known Kern Alder, but they had seen her during the short period she had been in town. Her death touched them more than the news that Blankton and Cap Lennox and Pete Ortman had been murdered. If she were dead, then their wives and daughters were not safe.

No one noticed that Hartford Hull had slipped from the room. If anyone saw that he was gone they would have assumed that he had returned to his post in the yard. But Hull did not linger there. He hurried along Second until he reached the corner of Railroad Avenue. There he called to a member of the shouting crowd and sent him with a message to Frenchy Talbert. Condon was at the mayor's house. Condon had to die before Alder's men arrived.

The mob came up both Second and Third. Despite the fact that more than half of them were drunk, they were orderly, and there was purpose in their march. The men within the house heard them long before they arrived. Hull, who had rushed back to his post in the yard came in, his face showing strain.

"We'd better get the women and kids out of here, quickly."

Boyce was steady, the rest of the council members inclined to panic. He gave his orders, and the women and children stole through the rear door and across the dark yard. The mob advanced along the street, a dozen flaming torches lighting its noisy progress. Boyce started for the front door.

His wife had remained. She elbowed forward to seize his arm. "Jerome, don't go out. They'll kill you."

He put her aside, not gently, and went along the hall. Hull stopped him near the door. "Let the marshal go. It's his business."

Condon had heard, and was shoving forward. Jerome Boyce's voice was more commanding than anyone had ever heard it. "Stay where you are, Joe. I'm the mayor. I'm the one to talk to them."

He went on then, thrusting the front door open and coming out onto the porch as the leaders of the unwielding crowd came against his light fence, splintering it by the very weight of their numbers. He stood there, a small figure facing them, and the shock of seeing that he was alone made them pause.

"What's the meaning of this?" His voice cut through the night, loud and demanding and steady. "Go back where you came from."

"We want Condon. Where's the marshal, the butcher?"

"I have no idea."

"You're a liar." It was Frenchy Talbert, in the forefront of the mob. "He's inside. Bring him out before we burn your place."

BUT Joe Condon was no longer in the house. He slipped across the rear yard, stopping suddenly as he saw someone move in the darkness. "Who is it?"

"Joe." There was a surge of relief in her voice.

"Lucy, what are you doing here?"

"Some of the women ran to our house. I came over to see what was happening."

"Boyce is talking to the mob from the porch. Listen."

Through the night they heard Talbert shout, "You're through, Boyce. You and Joe Condon made all this trouble. You're leaving town first thing in the morning."

The mayor's voice was deceptively mild. "I am?"

"We'll elect a new mayor. You and Joe Condon started all the trouble here."

"And who will you elect?"

There was a pause, then Talbert said, "I'm in business here, like you are. I don't want trouble, but I was arrested and my place was closed without cause. I want someone who will be fair to both sides. What about Hartford Hull? You surely can't object to him, and the boys south of the tracks know he's fair and honest."

Lucy drew a breath of relief. "If they let Hartford take over, everything will be all right. He's a good manager. He'll stop this trouble."

"Nothing will stop it until Pat Alder gets

here," Condon said quietly. Then, before she realized it, he was gone, fading back into the darkness. She would have followed, but she did not know what direction he had taken. Reluctantly she turned to the house.

On the surface, a compromise had been reached, and everyone within the mayor's home was relieved. Boyce resigned and, as his last official act, appointed Hull as acting mayor. Hull made a short speech to the crowd.

He said that Joe Condon was suspended pending an investigation, and he appointed two men as acting marshals. Then he walked to a corner of the porch and talk to Frenchy Talbert in a low voice.

"Condon's gone. I don't know where he is, but I've told Bunch and Forster to arrest him on sight." He nodded toward the two men he had just appointed marshals, and who were the two riders who had lead the attack on the beef herd.

Talbert was worried. "How many men does this Alder have?"

"Condon said about twenty. If they ride in, Bunch will try to make them give up their guns. They won't, so he'll deputize every man in sight and try to arrest them. The only thing we don't want is for Alder to get killed before he collects the gold for his cattle. We want that gold and the cows too."

Talbert said, "It's in the bank."

They looked at each other in a long moment of understanding. The risks were great, but the rewards were high. Hull went back into the house, well-pleased with himself. The mob was making its noisy way back down the street.

Lucy said, "I was never more proud of you."

He smiled at her. "The trouble is over. If Condon had used his head, it might never have started. You can't arrest a man like Talbert. He has too many friends."

She started to protest, but he had already turned away. Outside, Frenchy Talbert was giving orders, posting guards at the edge of town to warn him of Alder's approach, and perhaps to catch Condon. But he was too late. Joe Condon had already ridden out.

(To be concluded in the next issue)

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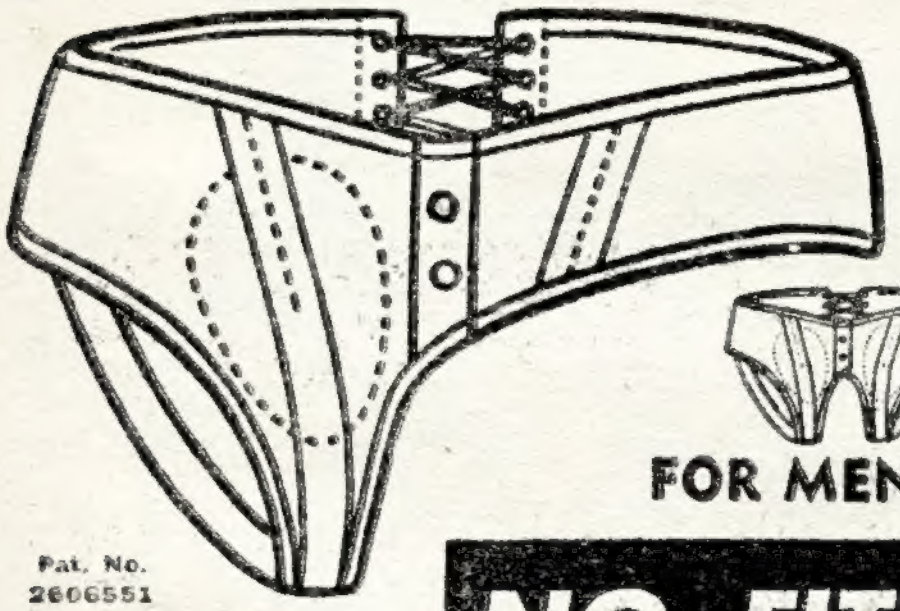

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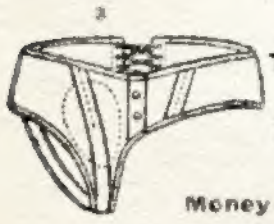

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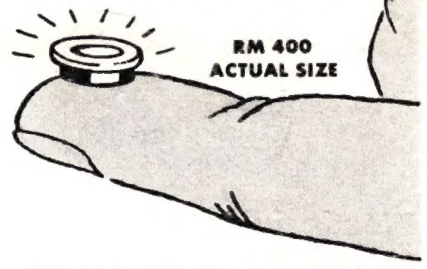

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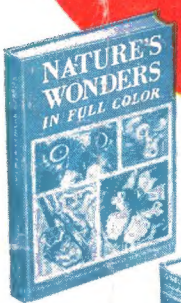

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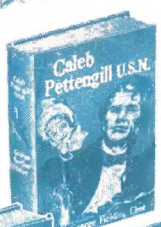

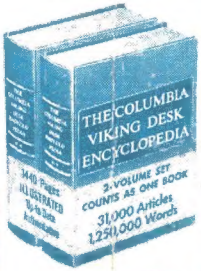

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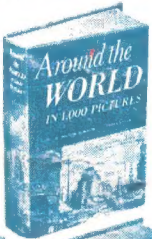

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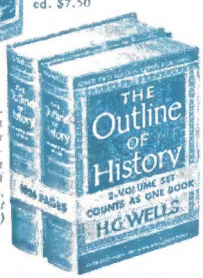

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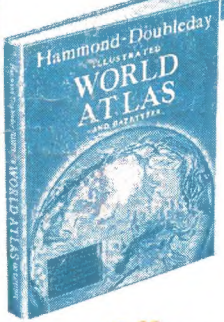

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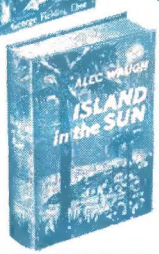

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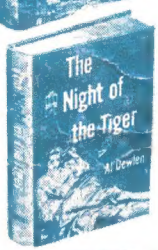

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